

A decorative border of black ink-style vines with small leaves and circular motifs, framing the text on the left and right sides.

*LISA M. ORBAN*

*It'll Feel Better  
when it  
Quits Hurting*

*BOOK ONE  
OF  
Okay...Picture this!*

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First Print Edition November 2015

First eBook Edition published September 2015

Cover art designed by Lisa M. Orban “Seeding the Sky”

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ISBN 9781517610753

*In other words, be nice to the book and to the people who spent so much time, energy, and sanity in its creation solely for your personal enjoyment as you journey through this book. ☺*

## Sorry Mom

A special thanks to Alexander Mann who is responsible for all of the artwork contained within this book.

Many thanks to Charles Wm. (Bill) Anderson who believed in my words enough to volunteer his time to do the final editing of my book.

AND

To Squirrel Boy a.k.a. Cory Grigsby, without his ADHD style of attention to detail while reading endless rough drafts, and his ability to make me laugh, even when I wanted to cry, this book would not have been possible.

## *Foreword by Charles Wm. (Bill) Anderson*

When I first learned of *It'll Feel Better When It Quits Hurting*, I thought, "No kidding. It always feels better after it quits hurting." Still, the title reminded me instantly of something my father always said.

So when the author contacted me seeking a review, I agreed to read this as a free borrow through my Kindle Unlimited account. Within 50 or so pages, though, I was so overtaken by the trials and travesties within this story, finding myself laughing at some of the author's statements and shenanigans, and in stunned disbelief at others enough to purchase her touching memoir. It is a hard book to put down and forget about.

The author's life is much that of a character in a Stephen King masterpiece. She is almost Carrie in the flesh. Yet, despite failed parenting and failures by most of those caring for her in her years as a foster child, and despite the snafus within her school years, Lisa Orban, the author, grew up and bettered herself. From the opening chapter regarding her grandparents, with the overarching message from her narrative of her grandfather that it instilled in her a certain innocence and love that, deep down, permitted her to survive the grief that was to come. The author shows us her perspective on what it is like to live on the 'wrong side of the tracks,' if I can put it in a common vernacular.

Her authentic voice rings true to her inner fears and a life as a foster child being raised, occasionally, by both folks with little concern for her welfare and rights as a human being, and, at least once, by a woman of sincere empathy who exercised real, true, love and understanding. I believe, with all my heart, based on observations I have regarding the foster care system we have, and based on the transition of our society from one set of biases and prejudices and moral shortcomings, to that besetting current society, that this is a must-read book for all stakeholders in the foster care and education fields. There is a bit in this memoir that, while it is hilarious in the reading, it speaks volumes in terms of the prejudice and inherent profiling (racial and otherwise) that pervades our education system.

I appreciated this memoir perhaps more than I can satisfactorily express. Suffice it to say, I am convinced it will go a long way towards improving understanding and love for one another, free of excess prejudice or morality encumbrances. My opinion, as stated above, though, has pertinence to the appreciation of a rollicking good roller coaster ride through life by someone who has dared to open herself up to ridicule in order that we can enjoy the trip with her, or share the joys, heartbreaks and fears with her. This is a must-read story that should be compulsory to all foster-care homes and the entire educational system. There is a wealth of education between the covers of *It'll Feel Better When It Quits Hurting*.

# *Your handy guide to finding the stories*

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## *Prologue*

When I was in high school, I attended an Alanon meeting that had a guest speaker from outside the local group. Nothing unusual in and of itself, but he made an impression that has stayed with me to this day. He was a recovering alcoholic. As he shared his story from its beginning, at the end of each little story he would add, "And then it got bad." He had a gift for making people laugh with him as he recounted all of his bad choices and the ever increasing disasters in his life. As things escalated, seemingly unable to become any worse, he would add, "and then it got bad".

Looking back at my life, it could be summed up much the same way.

Often at the end of each of my stories I am sometimes almost compelled to add, "and then it got bad". I am not an alcoholic nor am I a drug addict. This isn't a story of redemption through religion, or even a morality tale of bad choices. Many of the circumstances I have found myself in were beyond my control.

I was simply trying to cope the best I could while maintaining a smile.

This book is a bit darker than I initially intended, but I hope that while reading this I can make you smile, on occasion laugh out loud, and maybe even roll your eyes at the ridiculousness of the situations I have found myself in over the years, and near the end, as you finish each section you might, in the back of your head, hear the echo of, and then it got bad. And that's okay, because it did get bad, but in the end I survived to tell the tale and I do not regret any of it. This is my life, and I wouldn't change a single

line of it.

For better or worse, this is the mostly true, fairly accurate, and almost completely factual account of my life. Some liberties have been taken to protect the somewhat innocent and a few small embellishments were made for the sake of a good story.

## *I want to be the Madame of a House of Ill Repute*

When I was twelve my English teacher gave us an assignment to write about what we wanted to be when we grew up, as I'm sure many of you were given the same assignment. But of all the papers I wrote as a child, this is the one that stands out in my memory. I'm an adult now and a mother of five, I no longer have the paper I wrote from that far away time, but I do remember the title and that for one perfect moment in my life I knew exactly what I wanted to be.

I didn't actually know per se what a Madame was, or what it meant to live that kind of life, but I did know that it involved pretty dresses, expensive houses and gentleman callers. Not that I knew what a gentleman caller was either, other than someone who brought flowers and money. Since most of my knowledge of what a Madame was came from the endless Spaghetti Westerns my father watched on TV, it's easy to see how I may have gotten a somewhat skewed view of what it really meant.

It was the most glamorous career I could think of at the age of twelve, when the world felt awkward and so did I. Boys were mean, we were no longer young enough for the playground, but not old enough to date, and we all lived in that horrible never-never land of not quite. To be a Madame was to be the pinnacle of adulthood with all the glamour, power, beauty, and grace that can only be sustained in the mind of a child. Why would anyone want to do anything else, if a career such as this existed? Now that I am older I can look back at that childish image and smile, but at one time this was what I wanted to be more than anything else.

I am an adult now and I didn't grow up to be a Madame of a house of ill repute. In my life, I most often resemble the ringleader in a madhouse of anarchy. But sometimes, I wistfully remember the longing for flowers, gentleman callers and enchantment that I think all of us have had at one time or another. Whatever that childhood ideal of adult life may have been. My life is not glamorous, no high society people come to call, and any dinner party I have ever had has ended in the verbal equivalent of a food fight. But, looking back on my life I realize by and large it has been a helluva ride that I wouldn't exchange for anything. So, this is my life, for better or for worse. I hope you enjoy the ride as much as I have enjoyed the roller coaster.

## *Twiddling thumbs & peanut butter cookies*

When I was young and an only child, I spent many summers and school vacations with my great-grandparents. They lived in, what was to me, a magical house full of things to distract, entertain, and amuse. There was an attic full of boxes, each filled with a treasure waiting for me to discover. Exotic hats, dresses by the dozens, old dolls and even a wood burning kit not fit for anyone that didn't have heavy leather gloves and a full face mask that I loved to play with. It had a screened in porch covered in ivy and a back yard full of climbable trees and wild rhubarb to dig up. At night I went to sleep to the sounds of trains in the distance and awoke each morning to chirping birds when I slept upstairs in what they called a sleeping porch. My Grandmother taught me to knit, play cards and the wonders of Lawrence Welk, and my Grandfather taught me how to drive my Grandma crazy.

By the time I arrived on the scene of my grandparent's life, my Grandfather was retired and mostly puttered around the house that was my Grandmother's domain and sometimes I would putter with him. We would poke around the basement for things to fix or rake the leaves in the back yard for me to jump in, but mostly we would sit side by side in my Grandfather's favorite chair and twiddle our thumbs.

For anyone who doesn't know what that is, I'll explain. Fold your hands together as if you were praying, fingers down and then rotate one thumb over the other in a circle, and there was nothing in this world could drive my Grandmother as crazy as twiddling our thumbs. Each time my Grandmother walked into the room and saw us doing it she would immediately stop in her tracks, hands on hips, and with a tapping foot demand, "Arnold! Quite twiddling your thumbs!" and we would obligingly stop. But the minute she would walk out of the room to continue her interrupted travels, he would calmly watch her retreating back, then smiling down at me, we would begin again. Sometimes I think he did it just to drive her crazy, and he taught it to me so I could join the fun. If there had been an Olympic sport for synchronized thumb twiddling I do believe my Grandfather and I would have won gold metals for our performances.

My Grandfather indulged me in almost any activity that a young child

could dream of. We had tea parties where he would sit folded up in a chair, at a table made for midgets, and drink water from a cup while toasting me for being such a gracious hostess. He would applaud whatever I played at the piano, and hung any number of drawings I gave him in his upstairs office, and occasionally allowed me to lead him into trouble with my Grandmother.

On one such occasion, while Grandmother was out shopping, I announced that I wanted to make peanut butter cookies. Now, you have to understand, I don't believe my Grandfather had ever made so much as toast without my Grandmother's blessing, but, all he asked was, "Do you know how?"

Well, of course I did!

So my Grandfather, who hated all things sticky, (he even would get up at least once in every meal to wash his hands), agreed to help me. I decided that the formal dining room was the perfect place for our experiment and brought in all the ingredients that I believed you needed for cookies. I spread flour on the dining table followed by peanut butter, a huge scoop of butter, and a generous coating of sugar over the whole thing and, plunging my hands into this sticky mess, said, "Help me mix it up Grandpa!"

With an indescribable look of horror, my Grandfather put his hands into my concoction and tried to help. We smooched and smashed, kneaded and patted in an attempt to get what I considered the right consistency for cookie dough as it slowly worked its way up from fingertips to elbows, while he asked me over and over again, "Are you sure this is how you make cookies?" As our attempts to make cookies spread up our arms and across the table my Grandmother walked in, stopping dead in her tracks in front of us, "Arnold! What are you doing???" Instantly turning, my Grandfather pointed at me and exclaimed, "She *said* we could make cookies!" As if somehow that would save him from my Grandmother's displeasure.

As my Grandmother continued to stare, with crossed arms and tapping toes, my poor Grandfather slunk away to the bathroom to clean up, partly to wash the gooey, sticky mess from his arms, but mostly I believe to avoid any further dispute with the reigning ruler of the house.

## *Earning Sainthood*

When I was about seven, I learned from my great-aunt how to make scrambled eggs.

With this new found knowledge, I decided one morning I wanted to treat my Grandparents to breakfast in bed. I made eggs and toast, I sliced a grapefruit and gave each half and even made fresh squeezed orange juice. Since I had been helping my Grandmother make breakfast all summer, I knew how to do each of these things, except for one. How to make coffee.

They owned a silver percolating coffee machine that I had never been taught how to use. But my Grandfather always had coffee with his breakfast, no exceptions, every morning. As I tried to figure it out, a commercial I had recently seen came to mind for Folgers Instant Coffee, where all you have to do is add water to a scoop of coffee. Smiling with my own resourcefulness, I began making a cup of coffee. But with only one scoop it didn't look dark enough no matter how I stirred it, so I kept adding coffee to the cup until it had achieved what I considered to be the right color. I then took breakfast up to them on a tray filled with the eggs, toast, grapefruit, orange juice and my Grandfather's coffee; I had even added a small vase with flowers I had picked to make it all look nice.

As I presented all of this to my Grandparents, they both expressed how happy and pleased they were with all I had done for them. As I served them breakfast my Grandmother commented that she was surprised about the coffee, when had I learned how to use the coffee pot? I, of course, told them of the problem and of my solution to it, and bless that man; he choked down every bit of that coffee with a smile on his face and with nothing but praise for what I had done.

Although he did refuse a second cup when it was offered. If ever there was someone who met the criteria for sainthood, I do believe that my Grandfather's ability to drink that cup of coffee and make me believe that it was perfect without a single grimace or sign of distress should have qualified him instantly.

But, what I love my Grandfather for most of all is not what I knew then about his love for me, but what I only began to realize as I grew older. His endless patience, his grace under difficult circumstances, and his boundless love that he never failed to show, no matter how tired, sick or hurt.

And this is where we will leave my Grandparents. A few years later

my Grandfather became ill and eventually had to be put in a nursing home, and my Grandmother followed shortly thereafter. But I prefer for you to remember them like this, as I do, when Grandma ruled, and Grandpa pattered and they lived in a magical house full of treasures just waiting to be found. As with all roller coaster rides, there's always a staging area, it's a quiet place as you move slowly forward, but it's also full of excitement and hope for the ride ahead and maybe with just a little fear of the unknown as well. Now that we've reached the head of the line, we'll wave good-bye to them as they smile and urge us onward knowing that while it may be scary at times it's going to be a great ride.



## *Chapter One*

### *I'm all that remains of my bizarre childhood*

When I was very young, maybe three or four, I saw a movie about a small voodoo doll that came to life. With an equally small spear, the doll ran around a house, spending most of the movie hiding under furniture, where it would launch sneak attacks at the main character's feet. The heroine of this god-awful movie eventually tossed this small terror into the oven, baking it to death. As silly as it sounds, this horrible horror movie affected me until my late teens. For years I couldn't put my feet down on the floor after dark without fear, or reach for anything under the bed without a flashlight.

Even now as an adult, I sometimes feel a remote twinge putting my feet down on the ground in the dark. I know rationally that the fear comes from the leftovers of childhood imagination, there is no basis for it in reality, but that doesn't stop the small hesitation I still have.

Somewhere deep inside my mind that little voice is still convinced that one of these days something scary is going to come out from wherever it's been hiding all these years and get me.

We're all afraid like that sometimes, of things big and small, real or imagined. Sitting paralyzed in the dark, with the fear of the unknown, of change, of the thousands of what-if's that inhibit us from taking that first step up off the safety and familiarity of the known, and putting our feet firmly on the ground. It's a leap of faith against that small voice that says, "I know you're probably right, but... what if you're wrong? What if the monster *is* real?"

## *Sister for Sale*

Shortly before my 6th birthday I began to notice that my Mother was getting fat, and that the closer we got to my birthday the fatter she got. She began having troubles seeing her feet, waddled like a duck when she walked and was often sick or tired during the day. I was told that sometime around my birthday I was going to receive the greatest birthday present that I could ever hope for, and as my Mother got bigger, my excitement grew. Along with the changes to my Mother, there came changes to the house as well. New furniture arrived and was set up in my old room, because my parent had moved my bedroom to make room for the soon to be arriving present. The house smelled of new paint and cleaning supplies and as all these things were going on around me I became more and more excited. They must be right, with all that was going on there had to be something wonderful waiting for me at the end of it.

A week before my birthday Mother disappeared, other family came to stay with me and excitement was everywhere around me. There were presents stacked in the corner, full of ribbons and pretty pastel colors, and in the room that had been mine, began to overflow with all sorts of things both bright and mundane. I was informed by everyone that my present was about to arrive! A few days later my parents came home to the fanfare of family and I was presented to my present, a new baby sister. She was small, she was sleeping, and she was to be the greatest gift I would ever receive, and she was all of those things. For 24 hours.

The first day she was home, my mother sat rocking my sister in her arms as I stood by and watched the small, sleeping wonder. People came and went, and my parents beamed and talked about how quiet she was, what a good baby she was. I followed them upstairs that night as they put her to bed and stared down at her as she slept in her crib, and thought to myself, yes, this *was* a good gift. Not only did I have a new sister, but my Mother no longer waddled as she walked and could see her toes again. I began to believe that my life would go back to how it had been before, but with the added happiness of someone else to share it with.

The following day, the gift began to cry, and cry, and cry, and it wouldn't stop. She cried from dawn to dawn with only short breaks as she napped, but never long enough for anyone else to get any real sleep. We rocked her, sang to her, put her in cars and in swings, we patted her back

and rubbed her belly and tried everything but put a cork in her mouth. Which I had thought would be a great idea, but it was not a well received suggestion by my parents. My parents wore ruts in the carpet from walking her back and forth in a vain attempt to make her stop; trading her back and forth like some bizarre game of Hot Potato, so one of them could take a break from her never ending wailing. I thought to myself, no, this would no do.

This was not right. This was my present and I no longer liked it. I wanted to take it back, right now, and get something else. But I was told this was not the kind of gift you could return or exchange, she was staying and there was nothing that could be done about it. As the days turned to weeks, and the crying continued, my parents' attention was focused solely on the new baby with no time for play. I began to think about how this could be fixed; there had to be a way.

One late summer day, when my sister was about a month old, she fell asleep in her pumpkin seat and my Mother fell asleep immediately afterwards. I stared at her for the longest time, and then slowly, quietly, not disturb either her or my mother; I carried her out to my wagon in the front yard. If I could not exchange her and I could not return her, then I would sell her! I loaded her into my wagon and set off down the street to the corner, where I had to stop because I wasn't allowed to leave the block, and began hawking to oncoming cars "Sister for Sale! Sister for Sale!" until a neighbor noticed me.

Out of the house and down to the corner she ran towards me and the sister. Stopping before me, she looked down at my sleeping sister and inquired what on earth I thought I was doing? "Selling her," I responded, longingly looking at the passing traffic hoping that one of them would stop to take this problem away. Shaking her head, I was informed once again, I could not exchange her, nor return her and I definitely could not sell her.

I slowly followed the neighbor lady home, the sister in her arms, a small parade of three with my wagon trailing behind me. I came to the realization that the sister was here, to stay, forever, and nothing could be done about it.



ALEXANDER MANN '15

## *Song to Soothe the Savage Beast*

Life with the sister was definitely different. There were no longer quiet moments to share, relaxing outings with my parents or unbroken sleep during the night. Music played and vacuums ran continually, loads of laundry were done, partly because the sister leaked at both ends, but also so she could be sat on the dryer in another vain attempt to quiet her. The center of my parent's universe had shifted to circle around the baby. All activities were done to placate her, and nothing was ever done without first considering how it would affect her, because there was no other consideration in the world but whether or not it would make her cry.

When Christmas came, we all loaded into my parent's car to spend the holidays with my Mother's family out of town. When we arrived, the house was decorated for the season and everyone was waiting for us with happy smiles and welcoming embraces. There were cookies and cocoa, big meals taken in the formal dining room, cousins and aunts everywhere. There was laughter and large, pretty bows, and even the sister was, mostly, quiet. We sat by the Christmas tree with the snow blowing outside and a fire going in the evenings, while I dozed on the floor by its warmth and listened to the calm normalcy of adult conversations around me as the sister slept in another room. This was peace, this was Christmas, and this was wonderful.

And all was good and right in the world, until we climbed in the car to return home. It was cold, the radio was broken, and the sister began to cry. As the miles passed, the crying turned into screaming and the screaming became howling. As we rolled down the road, the grip my mother had on the steering wheel became tighter, her face more drawn and her foot became heavier by the mile, while the sister cried on, oblivious to the rising tide of frustration growing around her.

My mother begged me to do something, do anything, to make her stop, by the love of God, make it stop. I turned around in my seat and tried playing peek-a-boo; she just stared at me and continued to howl. I tried rubbing her belly and I tried to give her a pacifier, I tried "get the nose" with a toy and I tried "this little piggy", and still she continued, with the never ending wail that seemed to resonate up from the base of the spine until it ended in a spike in the center of your head. Out of desperation I began to sing to her the only song I knew all the way through, *Jesus Loves Me*. The cry turned into a whimper, and so I sang it again and the whimper

wound down to a snuffle and then to golden, blessed silence. Happy that she had stopped crying, I turned back around and sat down in my seat, when the silence was once again shattered by her crying.

Back up and back around I turned and sang to her again, and again she quieted, but only for as long as I would continue to sing. Throughout the two hour ride back to our home I sang. I sang until my throat was raw, but sing on I did, continuing an endless cycle of *Jesus Loves Me*, until we pulled up to the house.

At the end of the ride I honestly don't know if my Mother had been driven crazier by my sister's crying or the non-stop song loop, monotonously sung by a 6 year old. But I do believe that may have been the longest car ride in the history of car rides, ever.

## *I could read the mayo on the wall*

One fine day Mother took me shopping with her, just the two of us. We picked out groceries, as I helped her find items on the shopping list, and on the way home we discussed what we were going to make for dinner. Walking in the door, we heard my Father in the kitchen. He had decided to be nice to my Mother and make dinner for us, and the stove was busily bubbling with his efforts. I'm not sure if any of you are familiar with this type of food, but in the days before TV dinners or microwaves, there were "boil-a-bag" foods. Mostly things like mashed potatoes and some kind of meat, often with gravy, that were sealed into bags and then boiled to cook them.

As my father turned and grinned at us, I thought my Mother was going to have a stroke as she stood there turning red, staring at the dinner Father had made. To this day I'm not sure why Mother was so mad or why this upset her so, but take my word for it, she was livid.

My Father's grin faltered, as he stood there before the steaming, pot covered stove and announced "I've made dinner for us." As if somehow my Mother had not gotten the memo, and he was trying hard to deliver the good news.

For an awkward moment, we both stood in the doorway in silence, and then I was told to take my place at the table for dinner. We had a short, oblong table where Father at one end, Mother at the other, and I sat in the between the two of them. It was a very quiet, tense meal, where I ate in silence as I watched my parents glare at each other across the table. Until the moment Father asked Mother to pass the mayo.

She stared at him for a few seconds, and then with calm deliberation picked up the glass mayo jar and launched it at him. That jar sailed across the table with a gentle tumble at the midway mark, straight to where my Father's head had been the moment before he ducked. As the jar exploded behind my Father, he popped back up and grabbed the first available item on the table and returned fire. And so began the Great Food Fight of 1976. Mashed potatoes, peas and chipped beef flew with equal ease back and forth across the playing field of our kitchen table.

As the ammunition began to dwindle and the volleys became more sporadic, an uneasy truce settled over the kitchen as each of my parents stared at one another and the mess they had made. Even as young as I was, I needed no help reading the mayo on the wall to know that this was the

beginning of the end of my parents' marriage. And nothing in this life would be the same again.



## *Chapter Two*

### *The Decent*

My parents' marriage limped along for a few years after that. Until one day I was sat down by both of them and informed that they were getting a divorce. Did I know what that meant? They explained that for various reasons, they could no longer live together in the same house, and would be moving to separate places. Apparently, their imminent separation was much more of a surprise for them than it had been for me, and they were very concerned that I understand what was happening.

Oh, I got it all right. No more tense dinners or hissed comments, no more glaring stares or uneasy silence pervading the house, no more biting conversations or barely submerged hostility. Yeah, I got it, and “Thank God” was all I could think. It may have quite literally been the happiest day of my young life, where we could all just quit pretending everything was great and we could all just get on with our lives.

The end of my mother's second marriage began the first long climb of that roller coaster. Where we had all been strapped in, and like it or not, we're committed to the ride. Now begins the descent...

## *A new daddy for Lisa*

Whenever my Mother was between marriages, she developed a passion for packing boxes. No move was too far, no apartment was to be left unturned during these times. As my Mother relentlessly searched for the perfect place to live, she was also searching for that next perfect husband to make her life complete. New daddy #3 came along less than two years after old daddy #2 was left by the wayside.

The new daddy, who at this point was just the new boyfriend, came upon the scene with no fanfare. He was simply there, sitting on the couch one day when I came home from school. Introductions were made, and I was encouraged to like and be nice to this new person, and make him feel welcome.

Life went on close to normal for a while, with the only change of the new boyfriend being a part of the daily activities. He would sit on the couch and watch TV, tell my mother how things should be done, and on occasion disappear to unknown locations. Sometimes while out driving, we would park on a particular street and he would leave us to go somewhere that I couldn't see, coming back with a change of clothes or some other item and off we'd go again.

He loved sports. He had been a professional baseball player a few years earlier, and tried very hard to teach me the finer details of hitting a ball with a stick. I had no interest in sports of any kind, but I indulged him in his fervor for this game, and played along whenever asked. I had, after all, been told to be nice to him, and while I thought it was a silly activity, my efforts seemed to make him happy.

Then came the announcement one day; the new boyfriend was going to become the new daddy. Oh how wonderful it was going to be. I was going to get a whole new family, and we were all going to be one big happy family together.

Now that the new boyfriend was going to officially become part of the family and be the new daddy, we were to meet his family for the first time. That mysterious place, his parent's house, that we had never been allowed to go before, was now open to us. In timid anticipation I entered this new place, full of new people I didn't know. These new people were to become "family" and I was expected to be nice and pretend that I loved them. I was suddenly going to have new grandparents, aunts and cousins, and I was expected to gracefully insert myself into their way of living without

causing a fuss. Because as my mother pointed out continuously, this was something wonderful and we should all be as happy as she was about it.

This new family was very different than my old family. There were rules for everything, from how you ate at a table, to the correct way to brush your teeth in the bathroom. The rule was to never look up, always down into the sink so you didn't get the mirrors dirty. The house was always spotless, and you didn't sit in the sitting room, you only passed through on your way to somewhere else and never stopped to look at anything. There were no comfortable couches or approved places to play. This was a quiet place where children were only barely tolerated.

Sports were prevalent in every conversation or activity. Everyone was expected to know about every team and all the details of every player's stats. Grandparents did not play or indulge, and all things were regulated for order.

And so began the quiet before the storm. Packing boxes were put away in exchange for a new house. Meals were served at a table and usually on time. Family gatherings were common, with the constant bray of a sportscaster droning in the background. Each day blending into another, in the way I would imagine happens in the lives of most people, with very little to distinguish one day from another. Looking through the window at our lives, it would have appeared to be the live action version of a Norman Rockwell painting.

Not long after their wedding, a big announcement was made to the family. There would be yet another bundle a joy soon to arrive. Once again, I was told what a happy occasion this would be, how wonderful for all of us, we would now be a "real" family. As I was still coming to terms with the last bundle of joy, it was understandable that I had some reservations about yet another coming to live with us.

Space was made for the impending bundle. A new room created out of an old attic. Walls were put up, and the air filled with the scent of fresh pine and new paint. Furniture was added, final touches were made, and then we waited for the new arrival. The wait was not long, and on a cold fall morning a new brother came to be. This one was different than the last. He was quiet and slept, mostly, through the night. I was delighted. This one could stay with my blessing.

I took much more interest in the new brother than I had in new sister. It was more like having a lively doll than a screaming shrew. On occasion, I brought down the wrath of my parents in my interest in playing with him. Apparently, dressing him in frilly dresses and putting his curly locks in

pig-tails was not an acceptable form of play.

For several years, we played our respective roles as family. But, as time went on, the edges of our Rockwell painting began to fray. Small things at first: A tense meal, low words, less time spent with the extended family and more time left alone in the house. The dissolution of this marriage was much quieter than the last. No food fights at dinner. No shouting matches in the bedroom wayfaring up through the vents. But a slow, inevitable, march towards destruction nonetheless.

Then one day, the boxes were once again brought out, and the search for the new perfect place commenced amidst the chaos of packing. In a deal that was made behind closed doors, my sister and I would go with my mother, but brother was to be left behind. I would gladly have traded sister for brother, but my opinion wasn't asked for and would have been ignored if volunteered. So once again, new daddy became old daddy, and he left our lives with as little fanfare as he entered it.

Which is to say, none at all.

## *We don't clean, we move*

“A new life”, my mother announced, as we walked through the apartment she had picked. It was old, with worn carpeting, and smelled moldy. It had a decided 70's porn film feel to it, complete with a plastic stained glass wall for my sister's room, separating it from the living room. In my room, the walls were covered in a patchwork of shag carpeting. It was as hot as an oven in the summer and you could have stored fresh meat in it without spoiling in the winter. There was one dim light in the ceiling, and the windows were cracked in several places as well.

A new life was all well and good, but it certainly wasn't an upgrade from the old one. I didn't let myself get too distressed by this turn of events. After all, how long could it last? My mother was the reigning champion of the pack & move maneuver, and we had the boxes to prove it.

We moved into our new life with barely a break from the old. There was more time alone and very little family to socialize with, since most of my mother's family lived out of town. I was often left in charge of my sister while my mother went to work, and it fell to me to put meals on the table when my mother worked late.

Life settled into a new routine very different from the old. It was not as comfortable as it had been. There were fewer activities and little money for going out to dinner or movies as a family, which had once been more common. It was a little sadder, a little shabbier and a little more frantic than before. But every new life needs a beginning, and not all beginnings are easy. This one, certainly, was not.

Of the many things wrong with our new home, my mother blithely ignored them; often stating this was just temporary. Of the fact that I slept in my winter coat and you could see your breath in my room, my mother reminded me that we should all be grateful to have a roof over our heads. That the water sometimes tasted funny and had a red tinge to it was waved aside with little comment.

That the stove didn't always work right and the pilot light often went out was solved by putting matches next to it, and being told to simply keep an eye on it. Since my cooking skills were such that the stove wasn't required for much I thought very little of it, other than making sure the pilot light remained lit. An exploding house, after all, was never a fun way to end your day.

There were bugs that shared our home with us as well. They were most often seen when dark turned to sudden light in a room, to quickly scatter and disappear to unknown locations. They were annoying nonetheless. You knew they were there, even if you could no longer see them.

I don't believe the state of the house affected my mother as much as it did my sister and me. She began to spend less and less time at home with us. She did work more hours, but my mother's bed began to remain empty throughout the night more frequently, more of her time was spent away from us. She was once again in earnest pursuit of the new perfect life, and it didn't always include my sister and me.

After three seasons of bitter cold and sweltering heat, my mother decided one weekend it was time to clean house. She embarked on this crusade with gusto and soon the house was filled with the smell of disinfectant. Working her way through the apartment with dogged determination from one room to the next, until finally, she made her way into the kitchen.

Counters were scrubbed and floors were swept. Stopping at the stove, she decided it too needed a good cleaning. She cleaned the top, eventually moving onto the burner plates, discolored and crusted with the blackened remains of many mealtime disasters. As my mother popped the top of the stove to remove the plates, a black wave of roaches erupted from their hiding place. In a black fountain of moving insects they hit the floor to scurry off to whatever secondary hiding places they may have had, occasionally hitting my mother in the process. With a screech my mother slammed the stove closed and announced "We're moving!"

Two days later, after a flurry of boxes and chaos we moved into our new home, a trailer on the edge of town.

## *Marcus O'Realious*

To the screeching of tires and the clatter of rolling trash cans, my friend LeeAnn and I were awakened in the middle of the night, followed by the final thump of car doors slamming outside the trailer. With the engine noise now quiet, we could more clearly hear the sounds of laughter and slurred shouts outside my bedroom door, announcing to all within earshot, my mother was home. With company.

Soon, the trailer was filled with loud conversation and my mother's piano playing. From the noise level, the remains of the bar crowd must have followed her home. And with the party in full swing, they seemed more than willing to go until dawn. Since this was not an unusual occurrence in my life, and both of us were used to it, LeeAnn and I fell back asleep not long after the festivities began.

Shouting suddenly echoed through the trailer pulled us once again from sleep. I heard over the din of revelry my mother's voice raised in protest, "No! No! Not in there! The toilet's broken!" My brother had earlier in the week flushed a toothbrush down the toilet, after filling it with food to, "feed the fishes."

Random crashing noises, more clearly heard as movement brought whoever closer to the front of the house. Once again, my Mother's voice raised above the crowd, decrying, "No! No! Not there! There's dishes in the sink!" Pitiful moaning could now clearly be heard as my mother shouted, "In there! In my daughter's room," a pause, then, "There's a second bathroom in there."

As my door slammed open, bouncing against the wall to shut on its own behind a shadowy figure barely visible in the low light of my room. In a mad dash, running into the bathroom, little could be seen of this poor soul, who had obviously had too much to drink. Then the bathroom door shut, closing him off from further view. My friend and I talked for a bit about the stranger in the bathroom but quickly lost interest when we heard nothing but silence, and after awhile, drifted back to sleep.

Some dark time later a vague sensation pulled me awake once more. Not loud noises this time. The sounds of the party had long since died down, when movement at the end of my bed caught my eye. There stood a naked, youngish looking man doing calisthenics, completely oblivious to anything else around him. I quietly nudged my friend awake, and together we watched his antics with barely contained amusement, wondering what

he would do next. When he began doing jumping jacks, the silence that had prevailed while watching him, quickly fell to our howls of unconstrained laughter. His naked bouncing was too much for us to remain silent anymore.

With a grunt and trip, he fell to the floor. Our presence had, seemingly, gone unnoticed by him until that moment. And, by his reaction, I do believe we had scared him much more than his presence had us.

Our drunk, naked friend quickly rallied and recovered from his shock as he stood back up and resumed his exercise routine. Toe-touches this time. Our presence, once again, forgotten.

After watching him for a few minutes I decided some questions were in need of asking. Because as fascinating as this was, it was the middle of the night, and I was, to be truthful, tired. During a pause between repetitions I asked, "Who are you?"

With a start he stopped, falling forward this time in his surprise, landing between me and LeeAnn. After several minutes of wiggling and a bit of prompting from us, he eventually replied, uncertainly, "Marcus?"

"Marcus what," I inquired.

Gaining some confidence in his answers, he stated, "Marcus O'Realious Tired," with a big smile and a nod of confirmation for his efforts.

Hmm, now this was an interesting response that definitely required additional questioning. "How did you get here Marcus O'Realious?"

After a few pokes to wake him back up again, his response once again amused "I took the frog express, but I'm planning on hopping back in the morning," closing his eyes to the world once more.

LeeAnn and I discussed our options at this point over the soft sounds of Marcus's snoring. We could ignore him and go back to sleep or we could wake him up and question him further to see what else he could have to say. I could, in theory, go find my mother and ask her to take the strange, naked man out of my bed, or my friend and I could relocate to the couch and sleep there for the rest of the night.

The two of us sleeping on the couch had no appeal. It was small and uncomfortable. Marcus was laying on my only blanket, and there weren't any others in the house within range of reasonable acquisition. Not to mention, there had been a party not that long ago out there, and the realm of possibilities that we could walk into was infinite. Who knew how many other strangers also slept outside the walls of my room?

Finding my mother had no appeal. I had no idea what state I would

find her in, or even if she could be woken up if she had passed out. It would also require us to traverse the unknown territory of the now darkened trailer, something neither of us found the least bit appealing.

Ignoring him and going back to sleep seemed like a wasted opportunity for someone who had answered questions so wonderfully randomly. Besides, how often does a man just drop naked into your bed? To stay awake and annoy, we decided, would be our course of action for what remained of our night.

Before awakening him again, we felt that first we probably should cover poor, shivering Marcus up with something. There was something mildly disconcerting about watching the moonlight reflect off his bare ass as he moved about. Taking the top cover in hand, we folded him into it like a burrito, and then added a few stuffed animals for company and our own personal amusement.

Waking him was not as easy as we had hoped. The snoring by this time was quite loud and pronounced, but dedicated to our course of action, we continued valiantly on.

Poke.....

Poke.....Poke.....

Poke.....

until the snoring ceased and the complaining, in almost English, began.

As consciousness returned, he gave a mild struggle against the burrito covering. But, after a few feeble attempts at freedom, he quickly subsided in defeat, settling into resigned compliance. Both of us were quite pleased with that. It alleviated the possibility of any more midnight calisthenics. Or sudden, random actions while he was in our presence.

Now we could begin our favorite guessing game, 20 questions...

“Where'd you come from Marcus?” we asked.

“Albuquerque.”

“How did you end up here?”

“In a car,” squirming, once more.

“Who's car?” we asked.

“Somebody's.” came the reply. “Can I please go back to sleep now,” he pleaded to the two of us.

We briefly mulled over his request. We weren't actually getting anywhere with our questioning, and most of what he had said to us had to be lies. He seemed to earnestly believe he was a frog named Marcus, had come from out of state and was completely oblivious as to how he had arrived naked in my bed. But his answers were funny, and it was my bed

after all that he had so rudely crashed onto. So, rejecting his heartfelt request, we continued on.

Throughout the night we talked to him, questioned him and, on occasion, poked at him if he began to drift off back to sleep. We never really did find out a whole lot more. He was vague on details such as age (young), occupation (frog) or even as to why he had been standing naked at the end of my bed exercising (excessive alcohol intake). But, the answers were for the most part amusing, even if they were lies and fabrications derived from an alcohol soaked brain.

Towards dawn our attention began to wane in our torment of poor Marcus, and we left the poor bastard alone to get some sleep. Crawling over Marcus to get out of bed, an activity he barely noticed, we headed out to inspect the state of the rest of the trailer and to see if we could find anyone else interesting.

Cautiously, we opened my door and peered out where the remains of the party could be seen scattered here and there. The early morning light sparkled on full ashtrays and empty bottles, but no other movement could be detected. With cautious steps, we slipped through the door into the living room to the sounds of silence, as loud, in its own way, as the party in full swing had been the night before.

Coffee, we agreed, was needed now. At some point we assumed others would emerge from whatever location they had crawled to in the night and coffee would be good. We set up the coffee pot and while it brewed we began to gather up the party leftovers, depositing them in the trash. We cleaned up spills of alcohol; wayward cigarettes butts that had escaped the ashtrays, and began a small pile of lost & found items that were placed beside the door. Hopefully, to be reclaimed by their rightful owners at some later time.

By the time the coffee was done, order had been restored and little evidence remained of the invasion. Looking around in satisfaction, we poured ourselves a cup, and settled in on the couch to wait and see who might appear.

We didn't have a long wait before footsteps from the back of the trailer could be heard, with the occasional soft bump of unsteady movement against the wall, allowing us to follow their progress through the trailer. There was a pause before my sister's room, and we heard the door swing open. She was gone for the weekend and, in theory, that room should have been empty. But, any number of fallen drunks could have been left in there to sleep off the nights excesses. After a brief pause, the unsteady sounds

continued onwards towards the kitchen. As my mother emerged from the hallway, blinking like a mole at first light, she was followed by a new friend she had made the night before, looking this way and that in confusion.

“Good morning Mom, there's coffee.” I said brightly to her, pointing towards the coffee pot.

“Where's Marvin?” she asked, continuing to look around in confusion, as if unsure of where she was or even why she was there.

“Marvin?” I asked, beginning to suspect that the Marcus in my bed was the Marvin she was looking for.

“Yes, Marvin. He was here last night, have you seen him this morning?” beginning to look a bit concerned, and so was her new friend.

“Oh, you mean the one who was throwing up last night?” I asked, waving in the general direction of my bedroom and replied “He's passed out in there”.

At this point my mother went from pliant confusion to livid anger, “In your room???” she demanded.

At the beginning of my nod, she stormed off into my room. With a slam, my door was shut behind her and righteous anger could be heard through the thin walls. Poor Marcus was once again forced from his slumber.

“What are you doing here?!?!” My mother screeching to wake the dead, and I doubt anything less could have awakened him at this point.

“Trying to get some sleep.” came the pitiful reply.

“In my 13 year old daughter's room?” she shrieked, “What were you thinking?”

“Oh please,” he moaned, “I just wanted to get some sleep, they kept me up all night and I just want to get some sleep.”

My mother, storming back into the living room, glared at me with bloodshot eyes narrowed in suspicion, demanding, “What exactly happened here last night?”

Now, as to what happened last night was that mother had drunkenly brought home the bar to throw an after party at her house, then sent a drunk into my room to throw up. Whereupon she forgot he was there and continued on with her own activities, while my friend and I tormented our naked guest for the remainder of the night. But, I did not believe that was the answer she was looking for.....