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# Check the Box Marked Other: Exploring Gender in Family Life

Serenity E. Dougherty

Northern Michigan University, [sdougher@nmu.edu](mailto:sdougher@nmu.edu)

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CHECK THE BOX MARKED OTHER: EXPLORING GENDER IN FAMILY LIFE

By

Serenity Dougherty

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Check the Box Marked "Other": Exploring Gender in Family Life

This thesis by Serenity Dougherty is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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Committee Chair: Jon Billman Date

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First Reader: Monica McFawn Date

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Second Reader (if required): Date

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Department Head: Dr. Lynn Domina Date

---

Dr. Robert J. Winn Date  
Interim Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research

## ABSTRACT

### CHECK THE BOX MARKED OTHER: EXPLORING GENDER IN FAMILY LIFE

By,

Serenity Dougherty

The concept of a traditional family structure has been fading over the last 50 years and with this decline the notion of responsibilities being determined by gender is also losing ground, though it still has a long way to go. This short story collection works to continue to normalize the increasing variety of family structures, especially variety that has its roots in new notions of gender challenging old conventions. The stories are all set in Nebraska, an ideal landscape for exploring tradition versus modernity. Though there are major cities in NE, most of the state is composed of smaller rural communities with a heavy emphasis on agriculture and ranching. Land and livestock pass through multiple generations of the same family more often than not, and usually from father to son, not mother to daughter. The effect is a sort of timelessness, an aging farmhouse with a son bearing striking resemblance to his father, maintaining a ranch dog and driving a Chevy because that is the way he was taught and expected to behave. But modern families do exist in the area, standing out even more in a place where everyone runs into each other at some point at the only grocery store in town. Half of this collection focuses on this landscape, while the other half delves into traditional families encountering the more liberal world of Lincoln and Omaha in the southeast corner of the state.

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## DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this project to my Grandmother Patricia Cook, who passed away during its creation after a long battle with Alzheimer's.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to Professor Billman, who not only encouraged me to write a creative thesis when I had all but given up on my writing, but also agreed to dedicate his time as my thesis advisor. Also thank you Professor McFawn, for agreeing to be the reader for this project with very little warning. And finally thanks to all of the amazing and talented individuals I had the pleasure of completing my first graduate fiction workshop with. This project would not exist if it weren't for the amazing advice and encouragement all of the individuals above provided.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.

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## INTRODUCTION

The family dynamic has undergone rapid changes over the last several decades, especially in terms of gendered roles in the household. There are many factors that contribute to this change; the entrance of women into the public sphere following WWII, a higher divorce rate leading to more single-parent households, and the introduction of technology that allows parents to communicate with others in similar situations, alleviating the stigma and fear associated with non-traditional gender roles in the family that existed prior to its introduction, to name a few (Ruspini 105). The short stories present in this collection explore these dynamic changes in a landscape that seems at its surface to be so static- my home state of Nebraska. My mythology professor once made a joke about the Nebraska theme song- he said that Utopia translates best into “No Place” so that when we sing “There is no place like Nebraska” we are really asserting that we live in Utopia. It is ironic, then, that so many people couldn’t even tell you where my state is located on the map, that when you see pictures of British people being asked to label the US States Nebraska often has words like “No one lives here!” scrawled across it. To the rest of the world then Nebraska is a ‘no place’; people pass through but they do not see. The characters in these stories do not blend in, they cannot assimilate into a place that is not a place, they find no utopia in being the same. Ruspini’s book, “Diversity in Family Life” provided an invaluable starting point for these characters to deviate from the

standard, but it also helped to develop the intricacies and complexity involved in navigating family structure.

Reading “Where all Light Tends to Go” by David Joy and “The Boston Girl” by Anita Diamant offered an original take on the way that individuals of different generations interact with each other while also dealing with the social attitudes of their own time. Meanwhile, “Rules” by Cynthia Lord was a major inspiration for focusing on characters navigating relationships with family members that are deviating from social norms, I especially appreciated the way that Lord’s character wasn’t embarrassed because of her brother with autism, rather she was far more concerned with the ways others judged her behavior towards him. More often than most of us would care to admit, diversity in family members is something that we can accept, but it is the things that come with it that concern us- it forces us to re-evaluate our own social attitudes and belief structures and changes the way that society perceives our relationship to them. Finally Mattilda’s collection of essays by individuals who reject gender norms provided these stories with more intricate conflicts; each of the essays explores a unique way that individuals have run into barriers to acceptance and the way that society and even language itself requires them to explain themselves and their identity while simultaneously making it impossible to do so. The diversity of this reading list is the result of the enormous, even near insurmountable, gender complexity present in families. The following three stories are my attempt at examining this complexity: a girl redefining her relationship with her family long into adulthood, a boy coming out to his parents about something unexpected, and

a son learning that his family does not fit the mold as well as he believed. It is an exploration of the lies society tells us, the ones it tells for us, and the lies we tell ourselves.

## **Standing in the Bathroom**

To find the house, you first have to locate the mailbox. The actual house isn't visible from the road, it is concealed within the trees of the shelter-belt. Up until recently I would have been able to make the turn on instinct- it was my childhood home, after all. But a few years away at college and suddenly the gravel in the road looks the same, my subconscious no longer recognizes the places it washboards, the potholes, the fallen trees or grassy ditches. Growing up I felt like things never changed around here, but distance grants perspective. Even the pig barn is gone, sold and relocated shortly after the pigs. The crops to the left and right of the house rotate, soy beans to corn and back again. But the mailbox, that never changes. It belonged to my great-great grandfather, who joined the Army Postal Service in Britain during WWI and then immigrated to the states where he was postmaster of a fairly high level post office. When he retired the mail box was a gift from his employees. It is a hideous shade of green, popular at the time it was designed, especially for painting hospitals and schools. A bronze eagle face decorates the front with hinged jaws that open to reveal the inside of the box, its eyes set at a fierce angle. When the farm belonged to my grandfather he used to joke that it was more likely to scare the postmen away than encourage them to open its mouth to deliver the mail.

I squint against the sun glaring off the beak and look for the driveway. The talon clutching a little American flag is up, indicating that no one has grabbed the mail today. I stop and hop out to retrieve it, thumbing through the letters to my father and older brothers, the only inhabitants of the house. My mother is buried out back next to my grandparents and great-grandparents. I've always thought it was morbid to bury bodies in your backyard, but it was a more common practice in early rural Nebraska, and I suppose

my dad wants to be buried with his ancestors and my mom died before she had even considered that she might want a say in the matter. That's how I imagine it, anyway. She died during childbirth, so I never knew her. Not even 30 years old, and buried in the backyard of a farmhouse. Advanced directives and burial wishes are for those old enough to recognize death as an approaching reality, not women with children still learning to tie their shoes.

I walk through the unlocked front door. Only the paranoid and those with things to hide lock their doors in the country, as my father likes to say. No one is home, which I expected. As long as it is light out there is farm work to be done. The only one to greet me at the door is Baxter, an ancient border collie. He used to work dusk to dawn as well, herding livestock and chasing squirrels. He's been replaced by a more energetic model, very creatively also named Baxter, though they refer to him as Young Baxter, at least until Old Baxter gives up the ghost. I mentally assess Old Baxter, checking his teeth, feeling his fur, looking in his ears. Dogs aren't really my specialty, I am in school to work with larger animals as a Veterinarian, but I've had to take a couple general courses that included dogs in the curriculum. Old Baxter is fine as far as I can tell, elderly but healthy. He wags his tail enthusiastically as I check him, but the effort wears him out fast and he plops next to the fire place and pants loudly.

The house smells like perpetual Bachelorhood. I stopped bringing laundry home almost immediately after I started my freshman year, I was tired of wearing clothes that smelled like stale cigar and rotting food back to campus. I feel retroactively self-conscious about how I must have smelled in high school, though there is a strong possibility that my presence in the house balanced the disgusting with perfume and

hairspray. I've learned over the years to line my suitcase with a plastic trash bag before packing my clothes and then tying it shut each time I get something out to wear while I'm here, otherwise the whole pile will smell before I even put it on. The boys never smell like the house, they absorb the odors of their work; fresh cut grass, fertile soil, and diesel. I step gingerly over the pile of worn muddy work boots and head upstairs to my old room.

My bedroom remains intact, sporting evidence of my evolution since senior year of high school. The walls are decorated with posters of bands I can no longer admit I listened to, pictures of my friends and I wearing the horrific neon clothing of the nineties, and a painting of a girl crumpled in a field of wheat, her black hair hanging over her arms as she hugs her knees. I painted it in the mandatory art class sophomore year, and though it turned out really great I haven't picked up a brush since. A book shelf packed with paperback romance novels collecting dust sits next to my bed; I drop my suitcase next to it and grunt as I stretch my arm behind it to plug in my phone charger. I should take a nap or work on homework, but my bedding is damp from the crack in the dryer vent that runs through the unfinished ceiling so I throw them in the wash and decide to visit Mrs. Webster.

The Websters have lived about half a mile east of my family's farm since the early 1920s. Mr. Webster inherited the farm from his father in 1955, the rumor is that his dad shot himself in the old outhouse behind the south barn after a long struggle with PTSD from his time in the army. Mrs. Webster has been the only remaining occupant for the decade and a half, her youngest daughter flew the nest only a year after I was born and Mr. Webster died from blunt force trauma resulting from grain engulfment when I

was 13. My father was with him at the time, walking down the wheat in the grain elevator to remove the grains that were stuck to the interior of the silo after a rust spot on the roof let in too much moisture. Grain engulfment or entrapment happens on small farms, but I remember the farmers talking safety and rescue techniques over coffee at the diner claiming that people are safe as long as they keep calm and seek out an air pocket. Unfortunately for Mr. Webster an air pocket would not have saved him, the force of the grain rushing down killed him almost instantly. Mrs. Webster used to tell me that was the small farmer mentality talking; they'd all been through so many dangerous situations that they began to imagine themselves indestructible. My father started sending me over to visit her after school to help her manage her loneliness and in return she coached me through some of the more awkward moments of teenage girl puberty. I make an effort to visit every time I am home, save holidays when she is occupied with the return of her daughters and grandkids. Last summer we all celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday with a massive party at the Knights of Columbus Hall, she worked as the public high school secretary for many years, and it seemed like the whole town came out to see her. But most of the time she sits alone, watching Fox News and chain smoking, her only sister within driving distance now confined to a nursing home and everyone else too busy making the most of their youth to call.

I walk along the narrow dirt road that serves as a way for trucks and tractors to get between fields and irrigation systems without running over the crops; it is slow going, there are mud puddles and soft spots to be avoided, so I stare at my feet as I make progress. It would be crazy to try and navigate the road with my tiny Ford Fiesta and I didn't really feel like playing the trial and error game looking for the pickup keys in the

box of keys for vehicles and houses that have passed from my family's possession ages ago, so I am on foot. Lightning flashes in my peripheral, I instinctually count under my breath; one Mississippi, two Mississippi...but no thunder follows. The storm is over 15 miles away, but visible on the open Nebraska horizon. I consider turning back to grab a raincoat, but Mrs. Webster might need help securing her small collection of livestock before the storm hits. Sure enough, I see her chasing chickens into the coop, shockingly spry for a woman of 80. I break into a jog to help.

“Oh, Annie. Your papa told me you were driving up this weekend, great to see you darling!” She straightens and waves while the chickens take advantage of the distraction to scatter back across the yard.

“Are the horses in yet? How about the goats, are they in the north pasture or still behind the machine shed?” I scoop up a hen that got her claw stuck in the chicken wire in a misguided escape attempt. Mrs. Webster is shaking her head.

“All business as usual aren't you? How far out is that storm do you think?” She plucks a feather off her cheek and holds it up to the wind. “I sold the horses and the goats are already in the barn.”

“You sold the horses? When?”

“Oh about a week or so ago. I am too old to ride them and the young man I found to break the yearlings finally found himself a girl and moved to be closer to her. We can catch up inside, how far is that storm out?” The last chicken seems to be moving at a much more leisurely pace than the others, but finally they are all in and she latches the door.



“I don’t know, it was over 15 miles away before but I’m not sure by how much or how fast it’s moving. We could check the weather channel, I left my phone charging at home so I can’t look it up right now.”

“Well we can’t go in just yet. I turned my horses into a new little project.” She waves her hand and I follow her towards the pastures that used to hold cattle, but now just provide hay to feed the goats through the winter. “There, just pull those stakes out of the tarp, that’s a good girl.”

Under the tarp is a stack of wood, paint buckets and brushes, and in the center a brand new .308 Weatherby Vanguard. I try to make sense of the pile, but I can’t imagine what exactly Mrs. Webster is planning to do with this stuff. Then I recognize the hazard of leaving a gun lying in the yard and worry she might be getting senile. I turn to lecture her, but she waves me away before I have a chance to open my mouth.

“Now don’t get your drawers in a bunch, I knew you would head over here and your dad gave me an ETA this morning. I thought the tarp would be enough to hide it all, but I don’t think it will be sufficient protection in the rain. Help me move it in the shed and then we’ll put the gun in the safe.” She grabs a couple of paint buckets as thunder finally rumbles in the distance. I follow her lead in silence, patiently awaiting an explanation.

We make it to the house just as it is starting to sprinkle. I hold the door for Mrs. Webster’s old tomcat Henry, who pauses to stretch in the doorway, while raindrops roll off the end of my bangs and into my eyes. He stops to watch me as I come in behind him, his eyes wondering why I stood outside in that wet for so long. I move him aside with my boot and head through the mudroom to the kitchen. Mrs. Webster has already poured me

a cup of coffee from the old green thermos she keeps by the sink and passes it to me as she grabs the milk from the fridge for Henry. The kitchen is an experiment in eras- the tile is distinctly from the 70s, goldenrod circles and squares stretch across the floor. The oven is older, a gas stove with the multiple drawers and doors setup of the 60s. The wallpaper is harder to determine, but the way it peels and flakes makes it seem ancient. Yellow roses with Fleur-De-Lis symbols instead of leaves are interrupted by spots of exposed drywall. Standing in hard contrast to all of this is the shiny stainless steel two-door refrigerator with a digital display and an ice maker. If you didn't know what you were looking for, the rest of it could be mistaken as all belonging to the same time period, but the fridge shatters any illusion of cohesiveness and highlights that this is a kitchen that has grown and changed with the people occupying it.

“Did you want to stand in here all night?” Mrs. Webster’s voice cuts through my reflection on aging homes and I join her in the living room. She lights a Virginia Slim and speaks between drags. “So, how is school going?”

“Fine, nothing new.” A lie, but necessary if I am going to make it to the topic of the gun. “What is that pile of stuff for? Are you building a gun rest?”

“Oh no. You are building a tree stand. Someone dumped an old plastic port-o-potty in the ditch and I thought to myself ‘I could probably do something with this’ and then I saw a picture of one being used as a tree stand with a wood base and here we are.” She beams at her cleverness and digs for her remote in the side pocket of her recliner. The weather channel is on a commercial break, an unhappy soccer mom shields herself from the rain with her hand while the woman next to her is wearing a poncho, obviously

because she checked the forecast ahead of time. “Oh I hate that. How am I supposed to know how bad the weather is if I have to watch commercials every five minutes?”

“I guess you could go back outside.” I say as I glance through the bay window behind me at the downpour. “So you need me to build you a tree stand? Are you planning to go hunting this year?” I can’t picture an 80-yr-old grandmother climbing into a tree stand at 5am with a .308, the recoil would knock her and the port-o-potty onto the ground.

“Good grief, I think school is knocking all the sense out of you. You’re going hunting. I have the info pulled up for a permit on the computer.”

“Really? I won’t be able to make it back for more than one weekend during the season...” I don’t want to sound unappreciative, going deer hunting has been a long time dream of mine, but my dad wasn’t interested in toting a girl along for the activity he considers the epitome of his masculinity.

“Well then you and I are going to have to do some target practice while you’re here. Maybe you can even get a membership to a firing range near school, we’d have to transfer the gun into your name; otherwise you might have some trouble keeping it in the apartment.”

“Thank you so much Mrs. Webster!” I imagine ammunition is pricey, but it is nothing compared to the effort she put into this plan. I resolve to work my hardest to make it happen.

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I don’t end up getting the gun transferred into my name, but I get the permit and together Mrs. Webster and I give birth to the deer stand a few pieces at a time over the

summer. The first task was building and painting the wood base and platform for the toilet to sit on. We construct it in some tall grass and underbrush that has sprouted up between two ancient trees. They clearly broke the earth far too close together as saplings, by now one or both should be dead, their water and nutrient supply consumed by the roots of the other. Instead they've compensated by growing away from each other diagonally, leaving a sturdy 'V' shape for the stand to rest between. Unfortunately our constant foot traffic tramples most of the vegetation in the area, so Mrs. Webster plants seeds and we construct the rest of the stand in the barn in order to give them time to grow.

Today we are trying to tread lightly as we attempt the final step in the assembly: securing the toilet to the platform. So far this is turning out to be the most difficult part of the assembly- the unit is too unwieldy for me to lift alone and Mrs. Webster is tough, but not quite tough enough to help. We debate asking my brothers for help, but I am firm that they will tip dad off, who is already suspicious enough as it is. I can't say exactly why I don't want him to know about the project, I am old enough to make decisions on my own and even if he disapproves there is little he can do to stop me, but I swore Mrs. Webster to secrecy when we started the project and it feels like admitting defeat if we tell him now. Instead I take the four-wheeler down the road to visit the Meyers, their youngest Malcolm is just starting his senior year of high school. He agrees to help with Andrew Jackson as an incentive and soon he is holding the bars of the metal rack behind the single seat we are sharing, too awkward to grasp my waist for support, but not stupid enough to not hold onto anything.

Mrs. Webster laughs at us as we pull up that way and laughs even harder as we struggle with the toilet. I go backwards up the ladder and pull up as Malcolm pushes from the bottom. We get it on top of the platform, but then I realize that it is taking up the whole thing and blocking my route back down the ladder. I crawl down carefully off the back of the platform, but when I am halfway down I hear a loud thump and then screaming as a shadow passes over me. I look up just in time to see the toilet tumbling backwards off the platform towards me. I leap sideways off the structure and land hard along the tree, scraping the skin on my arm off on the bark.

“Oh my god, are you ok? Good grief Annie.” Mrs. Webster hobbles to fuss, but I am fine.

“Ok, this time I am going to climb into it from the side and we will bolt it down right away.” It is hard for Malcolm to slide the potty sideways after I climb into it, but we manage it and my weight keeps it from falling over.

I jump out immediately after the last bolt is in place and stand back to take it all in. The camouflage pattern turned out quite well, it is hard to even tell it used to be a bathroom from a distance. I imagine myself inside it tomorrow morning, sitting on the little seat with the stock of the weatherby nestled against my shoulder, the barrel poking through the hole....I realize we forgot to cut a hole in the plastic. I won't be able to see at all. Mrs. Webster is already speaking, so I wait for her to finish before I deliver the bad news.

“Well if it was a man I wouldn't ask him to dinner, but I think we did a mighty fine job for an old bitty and a young one. Don't you think?” She laughs as my face twists at being called a young bitty.

“We forgot to cut a hole in it.” Immediately she curses, but then composes herself and starts walking back towards the house.

“I think you mean *you* forgot to put a hole in it. There are saws in the machine shed.” I watch her go and then take Malcolm home. Apparently she has tasked Malcolm with sawing something on her farm before, because he tells me to wait when he get to his place and then returns with a saw in his arms. He hands it to me and my expression of gratitude is lost in the roar of the four-wheeler as I head back to the stand.

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I roll out of bed at 4 am, cursing deer everywhere and myself for thinking this was a good idea. The shower helps shake some of the sleep off, but I am still so groggy I trip on the stairs and hit the banister with a ‘thunk’ as I try to steady myself. I examine the wood for cracks, but it seems to have survived the impact, so I continue my descent. Dad is waiting for me at the bottom.

“Annie? What are you doing up?” He squints through his own fatigue trying to verify that it is, in fact, me. Thinking fast, I gave the only answer that made sense.

“Oh, I figured I’d make you guys some breakfast and pack some sandwiches for your hunt.” It completely slipped my mind that the guys would be up early to head out as well, but thankfully my dad is clutching his orange safety vest in his fist.

“Ah, we’re meeting up with some fellow hunters at the diner for a lunch break, but I’d love some breakfast! Thanks.”

An hour and a half later I wave and watch the tailgate disappear, then I run upstairs to get my shoes and head out, my own sandwich tucked into my backpack with a

safety vest. Morning frost makes the mud sturdier, so I practically run to Mrs. Webster's. I find her wide awake and alert, spreading feed in the chicken yard.

“And what in the hell kept you? I walked all the way over to the stand to see how things were going, all worried I was gonna spook a deer, and you weren't even inside.” She feigns vexation, throwing her hands out far for exaggeration when placing them on her hips, then winces.

“What's going on? Did you break a hip?” I chuckle at my own crack about her age but the humor is apparently lost on her, because she just shakes her head and goes back to the chickens.

Upon arriving at the stand I heave myself up from the ladder, grasping the toilet seat for support as I struggle upright. I only barely break five feet in height, so climbing into the cab of a truck is hard work, let alone a makeshift setup like this one. I rub my arm muscles absently as I load the rifle. I struggle a little with the vest and safety glasses, but eventually I am ready and resting the rifle on the little wood plank we fixed below the opening. I look down the scope that Mrs. Webster purchased after my aim wasn't improving to her satisfaction, but don't expect to see anything, what with making enough noise to startle everything in a ten mile radius climbing into this stupid thing. The birds are chirping the sun awake, it echoes around the inside of the potty until I feel I might go deaf. I settle in for the wait.

When 11:30 rolls around uneventfully I lean back on the toilet seat and set to eating my sandwich. I could go up to the house to eat, deer are unlikely to come out in broad daylight and the potty is warming up with the sun beating down overhead, but I feel too determined to give up already on the first day, so I tough it out. Two bites into

the sandwich I drop it between my legs into the toilet area. I fish it back out, but even though we power-washed the heck out of this thing I still don't feel comfortable eating it so I throw it out the opening in disgust. It connects with the ground and instantly a buck darts out from behind the stand and runs towards the opposite end of the field. I scramble to line up a shot, but he is long gone before I've even managed to click the safety off. Now it really is time to call it quits, so I gather my stuff and head back to the house.

As I recount the sandwich story to Mrs. Webster, I think of my dad and brothers out eating lunch at the diner. I should be able to join them. I should have the opportunity to share my own hunting stories, the sandwich and the deer and spending my day standing in a bathroom. I am distracted from my rising frustration as Mrs. Webster shifts in her recliner and I catch a glimpse of a bag of frozen peas resting along her hip.

“Does it still hurt? Maybe you should get it looked at...”

“Yes, yes, I was waiting until you got back. Could you drive my car? The keys are under the bathroom hamper.” She winces as she leans over to grab her shoes and I head to the bathroom.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mrs. Webster's primary physician works at the only clinic not affiliated with the hospital in town. Unfortunately his office is not open on the weekends so we have no choice but to go to the much more expensive hospital emergency room. Apparently this is not Mrs. Webster's first visit to this particular emergency room, all of her information is on file and current here. I am informed that someone has to call Mrs. Webster's daughter Emmie, I volunteer because I think she will take the news better from me. The nurse passes me the paper so that I can dial the phone number and I notice the word 'Active' in



bold next to Emmie's name. The hidden keys under the hamper gain some significance with that word, I wonder if Emmie took the keys so that her mom couldn't drive. When I ask the nurse she shuts me down, I am not immediate family and I don't have the right to that information. I rejoin Mrs. Webster in triage.

"Hey, they want me to call Emmie." I try to make my voice calm and unassuming. Mrs. Webster bristles anyway.

"Well god damn it. Can't an old woman get looked at without the whole world knowing?" She shakes her head and slaps the Home and Gardens magazine on the chair next to her.

"She's listed as your active power of attorney. That means she has to be involved in all medical decisions. Are you sick?" The question comes out before I can stop it. It hangs heavy between us as Mrs. Webster picks up a new magazine and starts flipping through it.

When it becomes clear that she is not going to answer I excuse myself and push the call button on my phone as I head into the bathroom. Emmie doesn't answer and I can't bear to leave her a voicemail, this is the type of conversation you have to have in person. I hesitate briefly, then call my dad. I know better to call him when he is hunting, but I feel this falls under the 'emergency' category. His typical 'Hull-o' is delivered with annoyance, but at least he answers.

"Mrs. Webster and I are in the hospital. I think she broke her hip." I fight tears and lose, watching them hit the tiles on the public bathroom floor.

"Has anyone called Emmie?" His answer confirms my fears, he knows something I don't.

“She didn’t pick up. What’s going on here?”

“I know how close you are to Mrs. Webster, I didn’t want to tell you until I had to.” The best apology I was going to get for the deception. “Annie, she’s been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.”

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As the sun breaks the horizon the next day I drag the old ice fishing sled behind me, weighed down under my first buck. Sweat rolls down my face and into my eyes, my arms scream in protest and my feet lose traction in the mud, but I do not slow or stop. The animal’s eyes are destroyed, shattered by the bullet I put directly through them; but they still give me grief for castrating him during the field dressing. I string him up in the walk-in cooler next to the one my brother got yesterday.

I wait inside the house in the living room, running imaginary conversations that ensue after my dad finds the deer. He will be confused, his first thought cannot possibly identify his daughter as the hunter. Emmie will be in tomorrow, she will wonder at the deer stand, but she will assume some local men put it together. At the hospital this afternoon Mrs. Webster and I will chuckle at the secret as we go through the photos I took for her. She will praise how clean my shot was and she will marvel at the size of the beast.

I am pulled from my reverie by the sound of Old Baxter wandering over from the fire to seek attention. Usually he walks along the side of the chair and bumps my arm with his head, demanding I pet him. This time, however, he senses the change in my attitude, instead of walking, he rolls to his back and exposes his soft pink underbelly. At

first I am unsure how to proceed, but I shake it off and reach down to scratch it lightly  
and croon my approval.

## My Little Brony

*Twilight Sparkle raised a hoof to knock on the door of Sugar Cube Corner. One of her five best friends, Pinkie Pie Pony, had promised to bake her a cake shaped like the diary of the two sisters in anticipation of Celestia and Luna's upcoming celebration. Just as her hoof was about to connect with the door it swung open, causing Twilight to lose her balance and pitch forward. She braced herself for impact as she saw the floor rise towards her face but fortunately Pinkie Pie caught her just in time. As Twilight regained her bearings she waited for one of Pinkie's usual quips- 'You shouldn't fall through doorways Twilight, you should walk through them' or perhaps 'Did you see something on the floor?!'- instead she was greeted with silence. Pinkie Pie was sitting on the floor with her shoulders slumped and her eyes moist and downcast. Pinkie Pie, the living embodiment of the Element of Laughter, was not in the mood to spread her usual laughter and happiness. Twilight stood a little straighter and stretched her wings; she was ready for action. Whatever it was that had her friend down in the dumps, she was sure she could help her overcome it.*

My fingers hover over the keys on my laptop as I contemplate Twilight's next move. I haven't decided on the exact problem that had Pinkie Pie so sad, but I know it is going to have something to do with poor organization or time management; something Twilight Sparkle is an expert at handling. I work hard to stay true to the TV show when I write fan fiction; I hate it when other fans twist the My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic universe into something bizarre or grotesque. However I do enjoy it when people introduce new characters into their

fiction, especially ones that stay true to the general themes of the show. I eye the trash can I placed in front of the closed door to my bedroom. In theory, the can tipping over will be enough of a distraction to buy me time to save my work and close my laptop if my father comes into my room unannounced. I always keep a browser window open to “Naughty Nurses XXX” behind Word when I write pony fic- it saves me from awkward questions if my dad decides to check my laptop.

I turn back to the story, but thinking about what would happen if my dad learned that his only son was writing stories about a cartoon designed for little girls is too much of a distraction, so I close the laptop and stuff it into my backpack. I fish the small stuffed Rarity pony that I run my hands over for inspiration while writing out from under my left butt cheek and stuff her back into the box in the closet. Now that I am sixteen I can drive over to my best friend Mickey’s house before school if I leave early enough, so I decide not to change my shirt and head out the door. My mom urges me to stop and eat breakfast but I pretend I don’t hear her and beeline to the car. I immediately regret the decision, it is raining and I know I can’t go back for my coat without acknowledging her this time. She’s awesome, but a little over-bearing and a really terrible cook. I know that Mickey’s mom will make me eggs the second she sees my car in the driveway anyway. On the way over I try to reflect on my story. Maybe Pinkie forgot where she put the journal of the two sisters and Twilight has to help her re-organize her room. There was a recent episode where it was revealed that Pinkie has a secret room in the basement that is hyper-organized with information on all of Ponyville’s inhabitants so that she is best able to throw parties and be friends

with everyone. So maybe organizational issues aren't realistic. Mickey will definitely have suggestions, Pinkie is his favorite pony so he will be able to talk me through it. Rarity is my favorite, she is the embodiment of the element of generosity and a fashion designer. I love the way she gets over-dramatic when things go wrong. I determine that when I get to Mickey's I am going to open with a Rarity impression so that he is in a good mood and wants to help.

I wind through the residential streets in the area Lincoln, NE residents refer to as "the bottoms". Mickey's mom owns a home in this area, but most of them are rentals with multiple inhabitants because the University of Nebraska is nearby. The houses are all run down, and there is definitely criminal activity occurring in some of them. The bottoms sit on a flood plain, so when it rains hard Mickey's mom worries. I give the water running along the side of the road a glance, but Mickey would have texted me if they were having issues. I've been over to bail water out of their basement on several occasions.

I hear a slice of butter hitting the frying pan as I walk through the door. Mickey is still wearing pajamas and trying to wrestle his wailing baby sister into her high chair; she is fairly forceful for a toddler. Mickey flinches as she throws her head backwards in protest and her skull connects with his nose. I rush over to distract her while he gets her into the chair, she loves me and is always excited to see me, even if she is in the middle of a tantrum.

"Isabel! Hey, where's Kevin?" My hands cover my face and her screams fade into sad hiccups as she stares intently at the back of my hands. She's a little old for hide n seek, but I think she is amused by the way I am willing to humiliate

myself for her enjoyment. Mickey snaps the tray into place over her lap and then heads upstairs to get dressed. I make my fingers do the wave across my eyes so she can see a little of them at a time. She giggles slightly and smacks her hands against the high chair tray.

“Ho-sie! Ho-sie!” She demands, so I give her my best horse whinny. “Gid up!” She squeals, so I walk around on all fours on the floor, stopping only when Mrs. Thomas sets my eggs on the table.

“Time to eat, Isabel.” I chuck her lightly under the chin and a bubble of snot pops under her nose as she snorts in amusement. I sit with my back to her at the table so I won’t distract her from eating.

“How hard is it raining, Kevin?” Mrs. Thomas crumbles a slice of toast into bite size pieces for her youngest child.

“It is coming down hard right now, but I saw a break in the clouds to the west.” She seems satisfied with my response, so we sit in silence until Mickey comes back into the room.

Mickey tosses me a jacket as he sits down. It is one of his older ones, smaller because he was abusing amphetamines up until fairly recently and he has put on a few pounds without the extra energy and appetite suppression. I grab it gratefully despite the garish Ed Hardy artwork decorating the back. Early autumn rain is cold in Nebraska and beggars can’t be choosers. Mickey’s own jacket has a Pinkie Pie applique his mother stitched into the lining inside of it so that he can wear it discretely while still being cheered by his favorite character and motivation for cleaning up his life. I didn’t know Mickey before the change, but

his parents have made reference to it in my presence and they make it sound like he was lucky to come out of his middle school years alive. He's a year older than I am, but he was held back in the seventh grade because he skipped too many classes. His parents weren't aware of his illegal activities until they were facing legal charges for not making sure their son was attending school. His dad moved out shortly after the court proceedings; the tension of each one believing the other to be at fault was too much. Now they both fully support Mickey's interests in My Little Pony, this year his dad put in overtime hours to help him buy a ticket for BronyCon- a three day convention dedicated to adult fans of the show. Mickey is having difficulty finding a job due to his criminal record, but he has been babysitting and raking leaves in the neighborhood to fund his trip. He keeps begging me to go with him, but I really can't fathom how I would buy a ticket and go without my parents knowing. I've considered asking Mickey's mom to lie for me and say I was just spending the weekend at Mickey's house, but after her experience with her own son hiding things, I sense she wouldn't really be on board with the idea.

“I started a new story, but I have a problem.” I start, then pitch my voice into the shrill pitch of Rarity in distress “But I can't figure out what Twilight is going to help Pinkie with and it is just THE. ABSOLUTE. WORST. THING. that has EVER happened!”

Mickey gives his own snort and spits some eggs back onto his plate. Even Mrs. Thomas is amused and compliments me on my impression.



“That was a pretty good Rarity, but you better be careful or your voice will get horse.” Mickey chuckles at his perceived cleverness while I roll my eyes.

“Hey, horse puns are the glue that keeps me stable.”

“Can you just help me? Please?”

“Whooooaa” Mickey pulls back on imaginary reigns and then coats his eggs with Siracha while he thinks. “What if Pinkie needs to attend an event that is meant to be very serious.”

“Ooo, that’s good. She has been to some where she should have been somber but she has always just been her silly self anyway. What would be so important that she has to be serious?” My first thoughts went to funerals, but they really don’t deal with death in the pony universe.

“What about her sister Maud’s graduation from rock school? Maybe her family is worried that she will make a bad impression and Maud won’t be able to get a good job because of it?”

“That’s perfect!” Mickey’s mom mutters something like ‘oh you boys’ and then collects our plates and heads back into the kitchen.

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Mickey and I don’t have the same homeroom, and I take a bus to the local community college for advanced placement courses immediately after homeroom is over, so I don’t see him again until afternoon chemistry lab. Lab partners are assigned in alphabetical order, but even though ‘S’ follows ‘T’, Melissa Schmidt has inserted her pesky last name between us. Melissa is one of those people who

would forget their head if it weren't attached to their body. Her mistakes in lab this semester have left me with multiple Bunsen burner marks on my lab coat plus a pretty nasty iodine stain that my mother unfortunately attempted to remove with bleach, causing the stain to set. Today we are collecting data on butane, and we've already had to request two new lighters because she messed up the measurements. It involves submerging the lighter under water and pushing down the button, but the school doesn't have a lot of capacity in their hot water heater, so unfortunately I am submerging my arm in ice cold water for the third time. Rarity would never have suffered such a humiliation- she would have charmed a young stallion into doing it for her.

I glance over to Mickey's table and attempt to convey my suffering with my eyes. Mickey is partners with Jensen Uhrich, point guard for the state-winning basketball team and also on the fast-track to becoming our class Valedictorian. Mickey complains that it isn't fair that Jensen gets athletic talent *and* intelligence, but I suspect he is just frustrated because he can't keep up with him in lab. Jensen has already recorded the data from the butane experiment and has moved on to homework that I recognize from the AP English course we take together. Mickey flashes me his own notebook- instead of homework it features a full-page drawing of sad Pinkie Pie, her eyes brimming with tears and her normally curly hair deflated with the weight of her misery.

"Which horse is that?" Melissa apparently also caught a glimpse of the drawing and has decided to feign interest out of guilt.

"It is Pinkie. Her hair gets straight when she is sad."

“That’s funny.” She comments. It doesn’t seem like much, but it is better than what I get from most of the students. Attending the same school as Mickey made the Brony identity impossible to hide- his locker is covered in Pony stickers. The secret Pinkie applique in the coat is only secret for walking around in public areas other than school, here he is an open fan of the show and never stops trying to convince other students to watch it. I decided early that I didn’t want to be the type of person that was friends with Mickey outside of school but too embarrassed to be seen with him in the halls- he definitely deserves better friends than that. However I still work hard to conceal my own Brony status from the teachers- I am sure they hear rumors but I try to never confirm them directly. My locker is completely unadorned; I don’t want my parents to learn about it during parent-teacher conferences or homecoming week. If a student happens to mention it I have plausible deniability- it is Mickey’s obsession, you know how rumors fly.

My thoughts are disturbed by the harsh cackle of the outdated loudspeaker system clicking on. The first time the voice attempts to deliver news the speaker cuts out at odd spots, but the profanity uttered by the school secretary’s frustration with the technical difficulties is unfortunately delivered clearly. There are chuckles from the chemistry students while the announcement is repeated.

“Parts of Lincoln have been affected by flooding and are currently being evacuated. We have decided to dismiss you early, but due to some roads being flooded you will need to remain in the classrooms you are currently in until your parents retrieve you. If your family is unable to reach you for any reason we are in

the process of arranging transportation from other families or faculty members. Please direct any questions regarding emergency procedures to your teacher. Thank you.”

All eyes land on poor Mr. Hartman at the front of the room. He fumbles for words for a bit, then announces we will be watching episodes of MacGyver until our parents collect us. He puts MacGyver episodes on fairly regularly when he is tired or just doesn't feel like dealing with us, insisting they are educational. As he disappears into the supply closet to get the TV cart and DVD there is a flurry of movement as students retrieve their cell phones from backpacks, pockets, and purses. Normally we wouldn't be allowed to get them out in class, but of course we could all plead trying to get in contact with our parents if confronted. A quick glance at Melissa's screen reveals she is posting a distressed selfie to Instagram with the caption “Stuck in Chem, pls send help!” followed by a series of emojis. Mickey joins the students in the back who are skipping text and going straight to calling their parents; his face flushes with panic as he avoids eye contact by staring at his own foot tracing the patterns on the tile floor. My mom sent me a text before the announcement, I'd be driving my own car and I was to ask the first set of parents who showed up to sign me out since she wouldn't be able to come get me. I joined Mickey in the back to share the news, he could probably ride with me as well.

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We didn't even have to watch a full episode of MacGuyver before Jensen's parents showed up, read my mom's text, and signed us out. Getting to

Mickey's proved difficult; his street wasn't flooded much, but there were nearby roads too flooded to pass and others were blocked with emergency vehicles assisting with the evacuation. The closest we could get was still four blocks away; walking there was a challenge because vehicles driving by were spraying water over the sidewalk, we spent most of the walk on other people's yards and we still ended up drenched and muddy by the time we got there.

"Oh thank God, Mickey you need to go pack clothes so that I can put things in your room" Mrs. Thomas calls out as she struggles to get the high chair up the stairs. "Kevin, darling, it is great to see you, can you help Isabel? I told her to put her toys in the toy chest so we could move it, but I think she is just making a bigger mess."

Isabel was indeed making a mess, she was in the process of trying to turn a bag of blocks upside down to dump them all out when I walked in the room. I save the blocks, then convince her to play with a stuffed frog while I put the rest of her toys away. My mom shows up about an hour later. Usually I would balk at the idea of her being at Mickey's, but Mickey's room is already full of things from downstairs so I know she won't be going in there and moving things will keep her from having any extended conversations with Mrs. Thomas. Still, I try to work near her so that I can stop any disaster before it starts. After everything is moved upstairs we load up the car with the family luggage and baby supplies.

"Where are you guys planning to go?" My mom asks, and immediately I tense up. I hear the note of concern in her voice and it is clear to me that she is reflecting on the difference between her own situation and the Thomas family's.

“They have some shelters open in town, hopefully it won’t actually flood and they’ll let us back in soon.” Mrs. Thomas snaps the last buckle on Isabel’s car seat and closes the door.

“You should come stay with us. We have a guest bedroom and Mickey can sleep on an air mattress in Kevin’s room.” My heart attempts to exit my chest. I mentally plead with Mrs. Thomas, but she has straightened up and there are tears pooling in her eyes.

“That would be so amazing. I can’t imagine trying to keep Isabel quiet with all of those people around.” Mickey opens the passenger side door and the volume of Isabel’s complaints at being in her car seat increases, as though intentionally adding credence to her mom’s statement.

“We would be happy to have you! I would love to get to know you better anyway, our boys are spending so much time together and it would be nice to talk to someone with a son the same age as mine. The girls I work with are all much younger mothers, sometimes it is hard to relate!” I am unable to hide my concern at this development; my shoulder muscles lose the strength to hold up my arms and my spine can’t deal with the extra weight. My mother watches my body crumple and gives me her ‘We’ll talk about this later’ look. I shoot Mickey a text as covertly as I am able: Ride with me. We discuss pony avoidance strategy on the ride home.

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I’ve uploaded my fan fiction to the cloud and deleted any trace of ponies on my laptop in the last week. What I thought was going to be a very temporary

stay has caused me to call in sick to school so often that my mother drove me to Urgent Care to make sure it wasn't anything serious. I can't leave Mickey's mom alone with mine, the conversation could be catastrophic. I also have to encourage Mickey to change clothes in the mornings, but he's worn his only two non-pony shirts so many times that his mother is growing suspicious. Tomorrow I have to go to school, my father put his foot down this afternoon and I can't argue with him. The flood waters are receding, but the cleanup crew associated with the Thompson's insurance company is swamped with orders and won't be able to visit their house until next week. There is no avoiding it: Mrs. Thomas and my mother are going to be alone together for several hours each day.

I am laying across my bed in classic 'Rarity in a crisis' fashion, my arms dangling over the side and my face buried in a pillow. I hear the door open and the shuffle of Mickey's duck feet on my carpet. I don't look up.

"Just get them to watch an episode. They might understand it better if they saw it. Mine did." Mickey closes the door and arranges himself in the office chair by my desk. He drops the makeup homework on it and picks up an autographed baseball my father got me for my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday.

"You realize my parents aren't your parents, right? I just don't think my parents, especially my dad, would ever agree to sit down and watch an episode. The theme song alone would put them off it." I hear the words of the song in my head- 'Myyy Little Ponyyyy, I used to wonder what friendship could be'.

"Hey, there's no need to be such a neigh-sayer. They might surprise you." Mickey gives an actual horse-like neigh to emphasize his pun and I roll my eyes.

“Can’t you just convince your mom to let you guys move back in before the carpets get dried? You can just stay upstairs, all your stuff is there anyway.” I drag myself up out of bed.

“Kevin, you aren’t being very generous. Rarity would want us to stay as long as we like.” Mickey spins on the chair.

“I don’t feel like Rarity anymore. I feel more like Twilight- I am worried about everything all the time. Plus all the makeup homework doesn’t help.” I grab the calculus book off the pile and flip through the pages until the equations blur together.

“Twilight would never give up so easily. She might be nervous, but she would stick it out. What about the time she had to tell Princess Celestia that she didn’t have a lesson about friendship for her that week? She could have been banished from Ponyville, but she didn’t hide the truth.”

“She kind of went crazy in that episode though.”

“Now you’re just being difficult. What about when she faced Tirek? When everything seemed completely hopeless and all of her magic was gone she was able to trust in her friends and find the magic she needed to defeat him. That was a pretty intense situation. If she can do it, you can too.” Mickey smiles and his voice reaches a fever pitch as he tries to shake me from my slump. “You are not Kevin Saylor. You are Twilight Sparkle, princess of Equestria. You do not back down from a fight. You will not be bridled by your fear. You will tell your parents about My Little Pony tonight. For Equestria!”



Mickey is right. I have to tell my parents and I have to tell them tonight. It will be better if they hear it from me. And who knows? Maybe they will take it well. Maybe I will be able to go to Brony Con. Maybe my father will be proud of his only son for being brave enough to admit he enjoys a show meant for little girls. Maybe.

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I decide to tell my mother first. If she has some warning, maybe she can soften the blow for my dad at dinner. I knock on her bedroom door and hear a flurry of activity before Mrs. Thomas peeks around the corner.

“Oh, Kevin. Come in, come in!” She throws the door open. “Your mom is giving me a wardrobe update.”

Clothes cover the furniture in the room, old dresses and blazers and slacks. If my mother was a My Little Pony villain, she would be Queen Chrysalis, leader of the changelings. She manages to transform all of her friends into clones of herself, she wears outfits for a few months and then puts them in her second closet to give away at the earliest opportunity. Women walk around my house wearing her outfits from last “season”, whatever that means. Mrs. Thomas is garbed in a dress my mother wore to my Uncle’s funeral last year. It is a little too short to be proper funeral attire, but she wore a little black hat pinned in her hair with a veil covering her forehead just above the eyebrows and somehow that transformed the cocktail party dress into something somber. Now she was working to emphasize the sex appeal of the dress, Mrs. Thomas is wearing a sparkling necklace and

what my father affectionately referred to as her “hooker boots” when my mom was wearing them.

“What do you think?” My mom asks as Mrs. Thompson does a little spin and I nod approval. “It suits her doesn’t it?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but Mickey was asking after you.” Mickey wasn’t, and would be bothered by the interruption, but it puts too much tension in the air when you utter things like ‘can I talk to my mom in private?’ and privacy was what I needed. Mrs. Thomas fluttered down the hall, probably thrilled at the idea of showing off her new look to her son, with any luck that will keep them occupied. I turn to my mom as she tidies up the bed.

The words stick in my throat. My mother hasn’t even realized I am still in the room, my exit was expected after delivering the message from Mickey. I think of Queen Chrysalis, impersonating the fiancé of Twilight’s brother, Shining Armor. Twilight knew Shining Armor’s fiancé Cadence from her youth, Cadence babysat Twilight regularly. But Queen Chrysalis is pretending to be Cadence and behaving badly, being rude to Twilight’s friends and making outrageous demands. Twilight tries to warn her brother, but he won’t believe her. She interrupts the wedding to try again and Princess Celestia even expresses her disappointment in Twilight’s behavior. But Twilight won’t give up. Even when no one understands, when no one will listen to her, she continues to voice her objection and saves the kingdom. Maybe that is what my story should focus on- Twilight can help Pinkie speak up when others don’t want to hear what she has to say. If Twilight can deliver news under such dangerous circumstances, I can tell my mother. I have to.

“Mom” I begin, clearing my throat when the word comes out unsteady. She turns, holding the dress she wore to my induction into the National Honor Society. “You may have noticed I’ve been acting strange this week...”

“Strange is an understatement. What has gotten into you? I thought you’d be happy to have your best friend’s family staying with you.” She is angry, but that makes it easier. I sense her anger about my behavior will help alleviate the concern she’ll have when I deliver the news, in fact she might be happy for the explanation, no matter how strange.

“Mickey and I watch My Little Pony together.” The words slur together and she gives me a look of confusion. I try again. “I’ve been nervous that Mrs. Thomas would tell you before I had a chance to. Mickey is really into My Little Pony. He wears Pony shirts and speaks in horse puns.” She recognizes the truth in that statement, the horse puns were the only thing I hadn’t been able to hide while he was staying with us. It is too ingrained in him at this point. “I watch the show with him. It is really great, but it isn’t for adults. They call adult fans Bronies. I’m a brony.”

The words just spill out. Her silence makes it hard to stop, but eventually I do. The quiet grows between us, a gulf of soundlessness that will be too wide to bridge if one of us doesn’t break it. I open my mouth in panic, but she raises a weary hand to stop me.

“Is it a sexual thing?” She doesn’t raise her eyes from the bed while she speaks. My stomach tries to escape my skin, issuing a low grumble of complaint in the process. So she’s heard of Bronies before, but only the negative stereotype.

There are fans who sexually pervert the show, littering the internet with sketches of humanoid ponies with double Ds and dainty hooves clutched to their crotches. I shake my head no in response, there are no words to answer a question like that from your mother. “Are you and Mickey...romantic?”

“What? No.” My surprise is evident, but she can’t decide if it is shock or hard denial.

“That’s fine, that’s perfectly fine. I just want you to know that if you are it is ok and of course I support your decision.” She smiles and tries to look reassuring.

“I know that mom, I really do. But if I was gay, don’t you think I would have led with that?” She seems to accept that so I continue. “Seriously, it would be easier to tell people about My Little Pony if they didn’t automatically assume it was related to my sexuality somehow. It’s an awesome cartoon. I’m hoping you and Dad will consider watching it with me so you know what it’s all about.”

“You’re planning to tell your father?” Her body snaps to attention at the mention of my dad and she moves closer to emphasize her words. “You cannot tell him. Not now. He’s having a hard time at work, the firm hired a kid straight of law school for the position your father wanted. He’s been taking anxiety meds again, you can’t add to his stress.”

I feel a twinge of guilt, but I bury it. With my father, there would never be a good time. “Taking anxiety meds again” isn’t the right phrase, he is always taking medication and if he stops it is only for a week or two at a time. He will

always consider himself underappreciated and always find evidence within the company to back it up. He probably didn't even apply for that position.

I give a sort of non-committal shrug and make a hasty exit before my mom can badger me further. I almost trip over Mrs. Thomas backing out of the room. Something in her look makes me feel like she has heard more than she was meant to, but I don't pause to find out. As I head down the hall I hear my mother saying something in a chipper tone and I expect that she will act as if the conversation never happened until the Thomas family leaves. Mickey is waiting for me in my room.

"You could have warned me that I was asking for my mom." He grins as he says it so I know he's already forgiven me. "So, does that mean you told her?"

"Yes."

"And? How'd she take it?"

"She thought we might be romantically involved." I grab supplies for a shower, playing sick has left me grimy and my dad is always pleased when everyone looks nice at dinner.

"Well I consider our relationship tantamount to a bromance." Mickey eyes the corner of my closet where the box of ponies hides while I slide hangers in search of a good shirt. "So, you're gonna tell your dad tonight then? I suggested that my mom and I should lighten Mrs. Saylor's burden by grabbing dinner at McDonald's."

I am immediately grateful that the conversation won't be so public, but Mickey catches a glimpse of Isabel streaking down the hall and runs after her

before I get the opportunity. It has to be tonight then. I can't expect them to be gone again before next week and who knows what new office catastrophes my dad will have cooked up by then. I grab my deep conditioner and head to the bathroom.

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I couldn't eat at dinner. I just sat there, transferring food from the plate to the fork and then back onto the plate. My mom doesn't eat much either, she stares at me with apprehension. My dad takes no notice, swiping through news stories on his SurfacePro and occasionally mumbling about stock prices while he chews. When his plate is empty he slides a glass of water in front of himself and drops two antacid tablets in it. I stare so intently at the bubbles rising as they hit the bottom of the glass that I fail to meet his gaze when he looks my direction.

"Kevin." I start and my knee hits the table, knocking over my own glass of water. I start to rise to grab a towel, but he gestures for me to sit back down.

"Linda, would you please?"

My mom jumps up to clean up the mess, a move so unusual I stare at my dad with concern. He laughs and hits the power button on his tablet.

"Don't look so worried, I have something to tell you." He straightens in his chair and puts his business face on, but before he can speak I interrupt.

"I have something to tell you too." He gives my outburst a stern gaze and my mother pinches my leg under the table where she is busy cleaning up my mess. "Sorry, you go first of course."

“Ok. You’re in class with Jensen Uhrich, right?” He continues at my nod while I wonder what on earth Jensen could have to do with anything related to me. “Well, he just got an acceptance from a pretty prestigious pre-law program, he interns at our office you know; I think that internship had a lot to do with it.”

I don’t object, but internally I wonder about the validity of that statement. As I mentioned, Jensen is a genius and likely the valedictorian of his class. It was more likely that his impressive academic record coupled with his performance in basketball factored into his acceptance, but my dad probably doesn’t know much about that, since he’s never joined us when we go to games and he’s never attended any of the end of the year academic award ceremonies where Jensen walks away heavy with medals.

“Well, I managed to secure you the same internship position after Jensen graduates.” He leans back in the chair and waits for my response.

“That’s amazing dad, thank you.” It is not amazing. It is terrible news. I have never had any interest in following in my father’s footsteps and he has never given a thought towards the idea that I might now want to. I try to be enthusiastic.

“Yeah, Paul said he was looking for someone and I said to him, I said you know Paul, I have a boy who’s shaping up to be a mighty fine student, he takes classes at the college and he knows his way around a computer. And Paul just said, alright, he’s in. Just like that.” He takes a swig of antacid water and beams. “What was it you wanted to tell me?”

I try to bring Twilight to mind but she has dissolved into tiny purple bubbles in my head. Rarity is gone too, little white balls of dying dreams. Mickey

is there, in my mind, urging me to channel my inner superhero, to fight for what I believe in the way that the ponies always do. But all I can see are the villains: Discord spreading chaos across the map of my life, Tirek draining all of my energy and growing bigger and stronger, Queen Chrysalis posing as a friend while secretly plotting to destroy all I hold dear, and even the meek Princess Luna, younger sister of Princess Celestia and so overcome with jealousy that she transforms into the evil Nightmare Moon so that she can plunge the world into eternal darkness and despair. I don't have superpowers. There is no magic in this world.

“Actually, Dad that is almost exactly what I wanted to talk to you about.” I plaster the smile on my face, knowing it can never be removed, knowing that when Mickey returns we will no longer be friends. “I've decided to be a lawyer.”

My mother looks relieved but my father looks confused as he grins. He never knew there was ever any other option.



## Head of the Herd

The bloated corpse stuck out of the fence and an unnatural angle; the dirty wool sprouting between the planks resembled the off-white fungus that jutted out from some of the trees in the shelter-belt, although that fungus usually wasn't fuzzy. Andrew held his nose and gave a resigned look to his surroundings. He wanted Mother Nature to answer for her crimes- the scene before him was so absurd he felt surely he deserved that answer. He was met with a silence only occasionally punctured with the distant 'maaaa' from the living sheep grazing a couple pastures north of here. Andrew stepped gingerly around the mud puddle onto one of the few patches of freshly sprouted grass closer to the dead sheep to investigate. The post-mortem swelling had pushed the rotted fence boards apart almost to the point of breaking. He had seen sheep turn their heads sideways to eat grass through the fence, but usually the only time they died was when the fence was newer and the boards were too solid for it to smash through. They weren't smart enough to turn their heads sideways to pull back through, so it was usually brute force that got them out of the situation. This fellow was not so fortunate. Though the boards were rotted and weak, the poor creature had been unable to gain any traction on the swampy ground beneath it. Cause of death: mud puddle.

Andrew waded back towards the four-wheeler and grabbed the metal chain from the rear rack. There was no more avoiding the mud on his way back to the sheep, the heavy chain obscured his view of the ground and he curled his toes and arched his foot upwards the way his father taught him to keep tension and pressure on his golasches so he wouldn't lose one in the mud. He heard the tractor start up in the distance so he picked up the pace and began to wrap the chain around the sheep, trying his hardest to ease the head

out from between the planks. There was no holding his nose now, he needed both hands to wrap the chain. As he finished his gruesome task Andrew realized that the sheep was a wether. This was surprising because they had sorted and sold the wethers several months ago. This one must have been missed, though it wasn't like his father to make such mistakes.

Andrew's thoughts went back to that day. It was colder than was typical for a Nebraska March and Andrew was home on Spring break during his second semester at college. His father had let Andrew get the sheep in the chute and give the vaccinations, usually Andrew was in charge of opening the correct gate on the other side of the chutes so that the sheep could be sent to the appropriate pasture- right if it was a wether and left if it was a ewe. They'd all been freshly sheared so it wasn't difficult to see where you were aiming with the injection, but they did move around quite a bit and Andrew walked away with more than a few bruises and one tiny wound from a poorly placed needle. He hadn't minded and had actually wore the injuries with a bit of pride, this was the first time he had been on that side of the chute and he saw it as an acknowledgement of his passing from child to man in his father's eyes. He had been mistaken.

His mother delivered the news later that day, while his father was driving the wethers to the sale barn in Sioux City. Andrew had just finished putting gas in his car from the old fuel pump, his parents had spray painted it with some sort of special rust-resistant spray paint to try and halt the decay while he was at college. Supposedly it was effective, but the whole thing was a putrid shade of orange and he wasn't sure seeing that color every morning when they woke up and looked out the window was worth it. He had gone inside to say good-bye to his mom and grab the laundry that his mother had turned

over to the dryer while he and his father were working. She asked him to sit down, he kept his jacket on thinking it would be a short conversation, by the time they were finished he was sweating and the fabric made him itch so fiercely that it felt like all of the skin beneath it was crawling with ants. Her words still echoed with him while he watched the tractor making its way towards him now across the field.

“Your father is pregnant.”

“You’re going to have a little brother or sister.”

“Your father is pregnant.”

“He is pregnant.”

And the words she didn’t say, the things that were said inside of him despite himself.

“Your father made this decision without you.”

“Your father gave you more responsibility today because he was protecting his womb.”

“His womb.”

“We’ve been lying to you for 19 years.”

His mother jumped out of the tractor cab and grabbed the end of the chain. She secured it to the front loader and then helped Andrew maneuver the corpse onto it. The fence boards didn’t hold out and the crack they gave when they fell apart brought a flood of images to Andrew’s brain, images of himself and his father fixing fences all over this property together, since he was as young as 6 years old they’d been out there together, sweating and sun burning and drinking water out of mason jars. Coming home covered in dirt and spending time plucking splinters of wood out after their respective showers, it was

better to get them while your pores are open from the steam, his father would say.

Andrew shook his head and realized his mother was staring at him as though she had just asked a question and was waiting on the answer. He shrugged and went back to securing the chain.

When it was done they set off towards the dead yard, an area tucked into the trees by the river. His parents hadn't chosen this location, it had been his father's grandfather and it was filled with evidence of that. An old bell tower was still crumbling there, Andrew had been told it came from a school house, back when country schools were the only reasonable choice for schooling if you lived out of town unless you were sent to boarding school in the city. The bell was long gone, probably sold for scrap iron during the war. But the tower itself somehow retained its structure, Andrew never touched it but he imagined if he did it would crumble to pieces. There was also an old freezer out there too, Andrew's mother had unsuccessfully tried to convince his father to pay a rather exorbitant fee to get rid of it properly. She was worried that Andrew might be out there playing and get trapped in it. She reiterated the warning to stay out of it every time Andrew set off to play near there as a child. If he didn't return promptly to the bell she would search there first, petrified that she would find her only child dead inside.

Andrew hadn't had many playmates as a kid. He had no cousins, or at least he wasn't aware of any. He was retroactively realizing that he might have relatives that just didn't approve of his parents' lifestyle. He hadn't asked yet, in fact he had spoken very little to his parents since March, he gave homework as an excuse to keep his phone conversations short and he didn't go home to visit after break, though the University of Nebraska Lincoln was only four hours away from home and he could have easily made

the trip. Most other students did, the dorms were near empty on the weekends. He had briefly considered getting his own apartment in Lincoln for the summer or taking summer courses and staying in the dorms, but he knew that his parents would need his help on the farm, his father was not going to be able to bear the bulk of the work the way he used to.

Up ahead the sun glinted off the metal of the pipe that was half-buried on the path. Apparently it had at one point been a rather muddy area and the tractor had gotten stuck more than once, so they put the pipe in to keep the path to and from the fields intact and also to give the sheep a way to the other half of the pasture without having to go through the water. They had poured cement over it, but over the years the cement had broken up, so now you had to drive carefully several large slabs sticking up along the pipe. His mother was not as experienced in this practice, so when she got to the pipe she went over it a bit hard and to Andrew's horror the corpse rolled off the loader and hung suspended in the chains from the front of it. It stayed there for a second, but then the corpse expelled gas and came apart, raining piece by piece down onto the ground as the tractor ran them over. The chain had bunched up around the neck, so the head stayed wrapped within them, the lower jaw only barely connected and dangling down, making the sheep grin an unnatural grin, like it was having the laugh of a lifetime. Then the head also bounced out of the chains and onto the ground with a wet 'thwack'. From her vantage point in the cab his mother had witnessed none of this, which was probably for the best since she had a weaker stomach than Andrew and his father and would probably vomit inside the cab. Andrew tried to hail her down but she wasn't looking for him, so he turned the four wheeler around and headed back towards the house to get the pickup and a shovel. They couldn't afford to leave the pieces to attract predators, the sheep slept near

there and they didn't want anything picking off their livestock. His mother would figure it out eventually, and by then he'd hopefully have it taken care of so she didn't have to see it at all.

His father was working in the garden, a chore that was apparently still something he could handle. Andrew could see the swell of his belly, though he was wearing even looser clothes than usual in an effort to hide it. Maybe people would think he had just developed a beer gut, though he was so thin to begin with that it was difficult to think anyone would be able to come to that conclusion. But people will believe the more unlikely condition if the alternative makes them uncomfortable. Obviously Andrew had done this, when his mother revealed that his father was trans Andrew didn't doubt the revelation, it was a moment where the words spoken out loud confirmed all of the little moments of doubt, cemented into place the thoughts Andrew had been too uncomfortable to acknowledge.

“We've been lying to you for 19 years.”

He never looked like his father. He had wondered about their biological relationship for many years. His father was short, only 5'10, and Andrew was a whopping 6'3". Andrew had dirty blonde hair and blue eyes, both of his parents had brown hair and brown eyes. It was possible that somehow he had recessive genes from both, but his father's family all seemed to be dark-haired and brown-eyed. His mother's had some blonde and blue-eyed though. He had asked once if his was adopted. A thought occurred to him and he broke his silence with his father without even thinking, because it seemed so important.

“Are all of my grandparents really dead?” He called through the fence.

“Both of your mother’s parents live in Missouri.” He leaned on the handle of the rake and waited for Andrew to continue, but Andrew turned to get the truck instead. “We need to talk.” His father called after him, but Andrew wasn’t ready, wasn’t sure if he’d ever be ready.

“We have a midwife coming this afternoon. I’d like you to meet her.” His father said as Andrew opened the door of the truck. “We’re planning a home birth, you should be there so you can learn about it.”

Andrew slammed the door and turned his back to the truck to face his father.

“Are you joking?” Andrew’s father stood still, his expression unchanged. This had always been the way his parents dealt with any outbursts of anger on Andrew’s part, they waited for his rage to burn itself out and then they went on with their day as though nothing had been said. Anger wasn’t useful, and angry words are not real words, they had told him. Andrew took a breath to calm himself. He wanted his words to be real. He wanted his father to hear him.

“You lied to me.” He started, but saying the words aloud brought the pain back to him and he lost control of his temper. His voice cracked and hot tears rolled down his cheeks as he continued. “You lied to me for 19 years. Not once. Probably hundreds of times. You didn’t involve me in this decision at all, but you want me to be involved in its aftermath?”

“Its aftermath is your sister or brother.” His father spoke quietly, acknowledging angry words for the first time Andrew could ever remember.

Andrew wanted to continue. He wanted to tackle every thought, all of the words swirling in his head ever since that Saturday in March. But his father was right. It was his

sister or brother. None of this was about Andrew. None of it had ever been about Andrew. He returned to the truck, sliding the shovel across the seat and feeling sated by the familiar roar of the engine starting as he turned the key. He revved it a couple times, it was making the music of his mood, the noises he wished his own body was capable of making.

As he arrived back at the sight of the corpse explosion he saw the tractor near the dead yard. He wasn't sure if his mother was stopped there, still approaching, or on her way back, it is hard to tell which direction a vehicle is going at that distance. The conversation with his father felt like it had lasted forever, he had expected to see the tractor already parked by the mess, his mother losing her lunch over the incident. The thought spurred him to action, and he began shoveling the body parts into the pickup bed. He realized as he worked that he was arranging the parts back into their original position, back leg on the lower right end of the bed, front leg on the lower left, torso pieces in the center. As the tractor approached he had almost assembled the whole beast, though he was having trouble finding the head. He heard his mother approaching from behind so he put the tailgate up to hide the mess. But when he turned she was holding her shovel out from her body, the head resting on the end of it still giving that sick grin. One of the eyeballs was still mostly intact, its milky gaze widened by the flesh sagging around it. Andrew could feel it staring at him, and his stomach turned. His mother dropped the head over the tailgate into the center of his re-creation as Andrew lost his own lunch as quietly as possible beside the truck.



## Santa Isn't Real

I was looking for Christmas presents. Isn't that always the story? You're digging through the closet for a sneak peek at your gifts and the next thing you know you're holding your mother's vibrator or your father's playboy collection. I was interested in more than just knowing what I was receiving for Christmas- I was searching for proof. I thought if I uncovered the elusive stack of gifts I could verify the non-existence of Santa Claus.

I was twelve at the time. My mother, sister and I lived alone in a run-down old house that belonged to my Grandmother. There were holes in the foundation that let in a constant stream of snakes and rodents in the summer and cold air in the winter. Walking down the worn green carpeted stairs in the mornings was a challenge- you had to avoid putting your foot through the rotting areas of the floor boards while simultaneously dodging the chunks of plaster that constantly fell out of the wall. The bottom three stairs were so bad that it was best to just jump off the side of the staircase at that point in the descent and land in the ever-present pile of soiled laundry that never quite made it to the basement and the washing machine. This level of poverty led me to consider myself wise beyond my years- educated by the school of hard knocks. I had stopped believing in Santa Claus ages ago, but my mother stubbornly refused to acknowledge her lie. My plan was simple: Find potential gifts, snap a Polaroid of them, hang on to it until Christmas and then use it as evidence to force her to confess.

I unearthed an old New Balance brand shoe box, the photo on the side depicted a standard pair of white nursing tennis shoes that my mother burned through faster than I outgrew my own shoes. I was unaware of the existence of things like porn, dildos and vibrators at such a tender age, so I threw off the lid without reservation. Inside was a pile

of folded yellow legal pad paper covered with an unfamiliar handwriting. I pulled out the first and started reading.

*To the Love of my Life~*

*I know what I have done can never be forgiven. I am a bad, weak man and I am unworthy of you. You are always so compassionate and understanding and I know that I constantly disappoint you. I just want to let you know that I have never regretted anything more than my actions last weekend and I hope you can find it in your big, beautiful heart to forgive me.*

*Love,*

*Your pathetic husband*

The handwriting was suddenly more familiar. I recognized it from the backs of old photos and entries in my baby books. It belonged to my father, my childhood champion and friend. He used to take me fishing at the lake and helped me build a derby car to win a local race. He taught me how to recite “The Night Before Christmas” by memory at only eighteen months and used it as a party trick until he realized that other parents found it creepy and intimidating instead of charming. I spent countless hours banging senselessly on his drum set while he tried to compose new songs on his guitar. He was a musical genius- play a song for him once and he could play it back to you with eerie accuracy. I had his penchant for memorization but not his talent for music. I played

flute in band but I was only second chair. The letter was vague and I couldn't make it make sense, no matter how hard I tried. My father could not have written it, I was sure. I packed the box back carefully and decided to spend my unsupervised time watching MTV instead.

That night I pulled the worn photo out from under my pillow and stared into my father's face. It was the only picture in the house of him, I knew my mother had to be aware that it was there but we never discussed it. His face was tan and angular, he sported the same nose as my little sister, a characteristic of the Tepp family. It arched up severely at the nostrils and you could see his nose hair just beyond the end of it even though it was light in color. The hair on his head was also blond, it hung long and straight just above his shoulders. The straightness was something neither of us had inherited, which was disappointing because smooth and straight was the hairstyle of choice at the time. My sister and I both sported replicas of my mother's wild and curly mane, though we ended up with more of an unpleasant wavy look than the beauty of a proper curl. In the morning I spent hours at the mirror with a straight iron every morning, but if there was even a trace of humidity in the air the waves would re-surface and all my work would be for naught.

Questions nagged at me over the next few days. I'd been expecting my father to come riding in to save me from the lifestyle we were leading with my mom. There were never any snakes when my father was with us. Thunder storms didn't shake plaster off the walls and into our beds. We were safe and happy and warm. I resolved to take another look at the letters and try to piece together a better picture of the situation.

My next opportunity only gave me enough time to get through a single letter, one that sounded almost identical to the first:

*My dearest, most beautiful spouse~*

*You mean more to me than I can ever express with mere words. I spend every minute I am away from you in agony, because my heart aches for your presence. You are everything about me that makes me even a little bit good. I know that I am weak and I also know that I need you in my life more than anything. I am trying so hard to change, but I am not strong enough to do it without you. I need you.*

*Love,*

*John*

My mother pulled into the driveway as I finished my second reading of the letter. I stuffed the box back and managed to arrange myself on the couch moments before she entered the house. I realized I was staring at a suspiciously blank TV so I stretched and yawned as she entered and expressed that I had taken a nap.

On my next encounter with the box I had different intentions. I replaced it with a shoe box of my own and re-arranged the closet to look natural. Then I proceeded to hide the box in a tub of Barbies in the basement. For the next several weeks I would spend my unsupervised time reading through the letters under the dim glow of a naked 40 watt in the basement. It was cold so I often tucked myself into piles of old clothing. Most of the letters were like the first and second, only hinting at vague misdeeds. But a few were more specific:

*Dear Sweetheart~*

*I am so sorry that I stole money from you and lied to you about it. I know we needed that money to pay the day care provider. It is so easy for me to slip back into bad habits and so hard for me to maintain good ones. I didn't grow up with the nurturing environment you've provided me in our home. I hope you will continue to provide me with love and guidance so that I can stay on the path of goodness.*

*Love,*

*Your humble servant*

I don't remember the specific incident with the day care, but I do know we shuffled between providers frequently during my younger years. There was one letter about an incident I was able to specifically recall- the Christmas before my parents divorced.

*Dear Cheryl~*

*I know that this time I have gone too far. I let my temper get the best of me and I have damaged our relationship beyond the point of repair. I know you were only trying to save me from my addiction and I am sorely ashamed of my reaction. I can repair the wall and my gift to you but I know I can never patch up the hole in your opinion of me. I can only pray that you will see my anger for what it is- a symptom of my addiction- and allow me to once again occupy a space in your home.*

*Love,*

*Your most regretful spouse*

I had been awake during that dispute, primarily because it was Christmas. I was busy pushing candy through the bars of my little sister's crib so that she could chomp them down, wrappers and all. My mother still tells people about the time my sister pooped candy wrappers, though she conveniently leaves out the part where she is engaged in a screaming match while this behavior is occurring. I could hear the raised voices, but I was trying to ignore them out of fear. They would yell, my father would stomp out and slam the bedroom door, then stomp into the music room and slam that door too. Rinse and repeat. I found my mother sweeping the shattered remains of the crystal nativity set she'd received from my father only hours before and behind her an enormous hole was in the drywall.

I continued to go through the letters, to decode the lies, betrayal, heroin addiction and stealing my father had engaged in. I wanted to understand the situation, I wanted to know why my mother had never disclosed any of it to me when I was screaming about what a horrible parent she was and packing up a suitcase I intended to carry all the way to my father. I packed that suitcase often, though I was never able to go through with my plans to run away to him because his location was unknown. In the years that followed I learned he was in prison in Texas, but at the time the world seemed less vast and complicated and I was sure if I just walked far enough down the block I would see him emerge from one of the nicer houses with open arms and a smile on his face. The letters spread like pestilence across my fantasies.

My mother eventually walked in on me reading the letters. Her car wouldn't start after work and she'd had to catch a cab home so I hadn't heard the crunch of her tires on the gravel driveway. It was inevitable, the way it is almost always inevitable that children

will be caught when they are trying to hide things from their parents. Her eyes flashed anger and pain and I felt like I'd swallowed one of the weighted basketballs we used in PE class. She collected the letters and demanded an explanation, I was only able to stammer excuses about looking for Santa gifts for evidence. She stared me down for a long time, her lips pursed and her fists clenched. Finally she turned to leave, I knew she was not forgetting to punish me, only allowing me some time to stew in my guilt before she doled it out. At the doorway she paused and looked back at my face and the tears running off my cheeks.

“Santa isn't real.” She said and stomped up the stairs.

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