

The Group W Bench

A weekly writing challenge

Collected Writings
2013-2014

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Introduction

Back in 2013, I was invited by a friend and colleague to be a part of a closed Facebook writing group. The format was simple: a short phrase each week that had to be incorporated into a new original piece inspired by it. There were no restrictions on length, format, or genre. The feedback was inspiring and constructive, and I got to offer the same to others. What fascinated me was seeing how the same phrase inspired people so differently.

I barely knew anyone in the group and knew almost nothing about them personally. It was a "single-tasker environment" - I got the prompt, I posted, I read what others posted, and then I got the next prompt.

Recently I have come to the conclusion that due to life circumstances, illness and other events, for the last 8 to 10 years I have been forcing all of my creative energy in to survival and problem solving, only things that were purposeful.

I thought back to these writings and when I originally wrote them. The Group W Bench represented "play for the sake of play." The stories didn't have to be publishable or submitted anywhere for money. There was no grade, no editing for punctuation or length. It was purely about what the phrase triggered creatively and how I used it. I could write whatever emerged.

This collection represents all 22 pieces I submitted back in 2013 and 2014. When I went back in to the old Facebook group to read them again, they brought me to tears. I couldn't believe these things came from me, how creative, clever, funny, sad or poignant they were. I feel very disconnected from these writings, and that writer now.

I thought it was a shame that these original Group W Bench pieces were hidden away in an essentially abandoned private Facebook group where no one could or would ever see them.

Think of this as a historical record if nothing else. These writings do exist. I think some of them are even pretty good. Others I can tell were pulled out of me with a tow truck just to get something submitted in time. But there are moments captured here that represent me in a way that nothing else does. I would hate to think that they could completely disappear, I believe they deserve a home that isn't a locked vault. None have been edited, corrected or changed in any way, they are exactly as written and submitted back in 2013 - 2014.

I recently decided to create a new Group W Bench in a different online community that I am now a part of. With this group and these weekly writings, I am pledging to stop making my creativity work so hard, to give it time to think freely and dream, to "waste" time on things with no expected outcome. It the closest thing I can envision to creative expression with zero strategy attached. This new Group W Bench is that pledge in action. I desperately want to believe this writer is still there in me somewhere, maybe this new experience will help coax him out of hiding.

Contents

These are the titles I gave to the pieces I wrote, and the prompts that inspired them.

[The Creepy Bear](#) - "sweep all the pieces under the bed"

[Gwen and Ellie](#) - "I'm pretty sure it was the dance moves"

[The Signature](#) - "and that seals the deal"

[The Lifter](#) - "well-connected orphan"

[Shells](#) - "Man, that looks like fun"

[The Three Legged Dog](#) - "dragged across the parking lot"

[Rerouting](#) - "a quiet night in"

[The Secret](#) - "waiting to tell you"

[The Best He Could Do](#) - "the ghostwriter"

[The Bar](#) - "you've had a few"

[I Love Those Eyes](#) - "just for a moment, let's be still"

[Rerouting](#) - "because sometimes it doesn't"

[Moley Moley Moley](#) - "The mole had returned"

[Buy Yourself Something Nice...](#) - "the priest just kinda' laughed"

[The End](#) - "It was fun while it lasted"

[The One Where They Are Sitting At The Bar...](#) - "Despite what all the studies have shown"

[Untitled](#) - "count your blessings"

[The Empty Bunk](#) - "out there in the dark"

[A Really Soft Hoodie](#) - "tie me down"

[The Airport](#) - "a place to land"

[Drink Until I Forget](#) - "a very passable imitation"

[Finnegan's Five](#) - "mix things up a bit"

The Creepy Bear

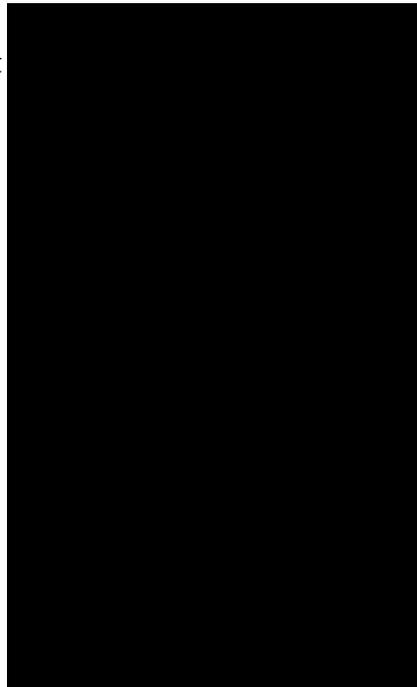
Prompt: "sweep all the pieces under the bed" • December 6, 2013

It was always there, that bear, blue and shiny, ceramic, maybe even hand painted. It just sat there on the shelf next to the TV, so out of place next to the Lladrós and the candlesticks, the stupid creepy little bear. Yes, creepy. Very creepy. There was something wrong with the eyes, the way it looked at me, and it had rosy cheeks. Like a clown face but on a bear. I don't know where it came from or whose it was, it was just always there. It was a bank but I never knew because up until the day I stole it, I had never touched it or really seen it up close.

When I was 9 I remember one day getting home from school before anyone else and sitting down in front of the TV with a sandwich. We weren't supposed to eat in the family room but we always did. I was trying to watch my show, probably some cartoon, Speed Racer or maybe Scooby Doo, when I looked over at the bear. I finished up my snack and walked over to the shelving unit that housed our TV and the various knick-knacks. I stared at the bear and for a minute I was sure it was staring right back at me. Even though I knew I was home alone, I looked around the room to make sure that no one else was watching. I didn't know what I was going to do with it, or why I was taking it, but all of a sudden I just grabbed the bear off the shelf and ran down the hallway to my room, slamming my door behind me.

I sat on the side of my bed and tried to catch my breath, clutching the bear between my hands, squeezing it, sure it was trying to escape. It was then that I felt the coin slot on the back of its head and I flipped it over to see a rubber stopper to keep the coins contained. I gave it a shake but it felt empty. I turned it back so that its creepy eyes were facing mine and I began to stare it down. 5 minutes, 10, 20, I don't know how long for sure, I just sat and held that bear in my hands, staring in to its eyes, daring it to do something. The house was quiet, only my nervous breathing breaking the silence. I continued to stare for a few minutes more, its creepy eyes seeming to follow me but never blinking.

Now I know this all sounds silly now, I know now as I did then that it was just a plain old little ceramic bear, that it wasn't alive, it wasn't going to move, or blink, or speak. I can't really explain what I was thinking, it just felt good to have this thing that sort of haunted me wrapped up in my hands, under my control. I held it for a few minutes more and it



This is the actual bear, although there is some discussion that it might actually be a mouse.

began to anger me, it was still smiling at me with that silly clown smile. Why did it smile at me? There was nothing funny, nothing worth smiling about. Without thinking I threw it as hard as I could against the closet door and watched it shatter in to pieces on my bedroom floor.

I don't know how long I sat there afterwards, but the sound of the garage door opening broke me out of whatever trance I had put myself in. Panic started to set in, what had I done? I knew that the first thing I needed to do was to conceal my crime so I hurriedly tried to sweep all the pieces under the bed.

Gwen and Ellie

Prompt: "I'm pretty sure it was the dance moves" • December 13, 2013

I have identified a bunch of scenes in my novel that still need to be written so this was something to try and fill in one of those gaps, mainly explaining how Gwen, my main character, and her partner met. I'm likely to do this somewhat often if it seems like it could fit with the POTW. It's a little barren but at least it exists now for the revising stage.

When Ellie and I tell the story of how we got together one of us will always attribute our attraction to the other with the statement "I'm pretty sure it was the dance moves" which in some variation has become sort of a mantra for us to explain away anything we just accept but don't really understand. It's odd, but then so are we, and there is a hint of truth to it.

In reality, I met Ellie about three years ago when she came in as a consultant for a large project we had been contracted to do for work. We worked well together and became fast friends. The first few times she and I went out together it was with work people as part of a larger group. We did have lunch a few times together but that was usually also in a group, or if just us it was a quick run for a sandwich between meetings. We eventually did seem to be going out of our way to find each other within the groups and before I really knew it we were spending quite a bit of time together.

About six weeks in we started to go out just the two of us, to dinner and to movies, or just hang out. I guess it was like dating but we never called it that. I didn't really think about us as a couple, that is until we were. It was just another Friday and it was just supposed to be dancing. I wasn't supposed to fall for her but that night I did. The first time she leaned in to kiss me, I reciprocated. Later, when she went further, as I hoped she would, I didn't resist. It just all felt right, me and her, us. I don't know what came over us that night but if you ask me, I'm pretty sure it was the dance moves.

The Signature

Prompt: "and that seals the deal" • December 20, 2013

He handed me a cheap pen to sign the papers. I know any pen will work but it seems that given what was transpiring he could have sprung for something fancy. I don't necessarily mean a Montblanc but maybe something other than a promo pen for Buenos Tacos.

I noticed he had a nice pen in his hand which he used to mark the signature line. "You just need to sign and date on the line by the x, and again on the bottom of the next page" he said as he pushed the papers towards me from his side of the desk. I reached for them and started to read them one last time, even though I had long ago memorized them. I paused for a second and looked at the room around me. I had sat in this office dozens of times during my lifetime but I don't think I had ever really paid much attention to it. It was fancy, the sort of office an important person would have, with lots of books and a big desk and wood cabinets and photos on the wall, and a globe. All nice offices have a globe.

I knew I was stalling but it didn't stop me from standing and walking over towards a curio cabinet next to the window. Glancing inside I saw all matter of things, old lighters, small figurines, a cribbage board, a small bowl of marbles and a snow globe with the New York Skyline inside it.

"Ben" he said. "I thought you had decided..."

I interrupted before he could finish. "Yes, I have. It's just, I need a minute. This isn't easy you know."

"Of course" he said. "I don't mean to rush you."

But he did, he did mean to rush me. He wanted this done, finished, wrapped up, and he wanted me out of his office. That was obvious. I took a last look at the snow globe and noticed the Statue of Liberty had the wrong arm raised.

"Ok, let's do this" I said as I returned back to my side of the desk. I didn't even bother to sit, I just leaned down and signed the papers in the appropriate spots and then turned them back towards him. I watched as he also read them over one last time and countersigned on the opposite side of the pages. He put out his hand and as I shook it I thought to myself "and that seals the deal." There were no more words spoken. He fiddled with the the pages and pretended to organize them while I gathered my things, pocketed his fancy pen, and walked out of the office.

The Lifter

Prompt: "well-connected orphan" • December 27, 2013

It was hot. Sweltering. Dangerous. I'm wishing I was home in my air conditioned flat but business is business and heat is no excuse for not getting the job done. Nope, today was the day and the folks I work for expect results. I could have gone through the tube, I didn't have to be out here, but that brought with it its own challenges. A lot of chances to be seen, asked for papers, questioned and brought in. It was easier to do it this way, even with the heat.

I try to keep myself hydrated, I've learned how much water I need, how to dress and how to move about in the shade as much as possible but hot is hot and I've been out here for nearly five hours. Now is the time when lesser lifters often slip up but I've been at this game for a long time now and have made this run dozens of times. Nope, I know my way around. A few cigarettes, some homemade shine and a baggie full of X get me the fake papers I need plus transport through the gates.

It's pretty easy for me to get what I need. To be honest, a well-connected orphan can move about invisibly in and out of the walled city. Family is a liability in my line of work, they talk too much and have caused more than a few issues. More than once, family members have ended up dead for deeds like mine. If they can't get to the lifter, a family member will do instead so solo lifters like me are the norm. If we're not orphans when we get started, we'll usually end up that way soon enough.

Just a few more miles and I'll be back at the gate and then back inside. The pay for this run will be nice, dangerous work does bring with it nice rewards. A good lifter can earn enough credits in just a few years to live comfortably, provided we can stay alive long enough to enjoy it.

Shells

Prompt: "Man, that looks like fun" • January 3, 2014

For the first few days our conversations were guarded and awkward, which I guess makes sense since we didn't really know each other. I have always felt that two strangers just meeting start off with a shell around them, to protect them while they get to know the other person. As you talk to each other bits of that shell chip away and eventually you start sharing more. We started talking about the basics, name, occupation and such when we left Colorado but even that was on a superficial level. We didn't do much to open up any of the other areas though, we haven't even discussed the reason for our trip. Apparently the shell is stronger in some places than others. I think my shell is especially strong around my family and Brett seemed to less open about his as well. It seems that when you're driving through Indiana though, there really isn't much else to do other than talk and our shells started to break away a bit more quickly. While still staying quiet about some things, we soon got more comfortable with each other, and our conversations got more interesting.

"I don't know when it happens Gwen, it's probably different for everyone, but eventually we just grow up even if we don't mean to. I think we just wake up one day and our childhood, it's gone. I mean, think of the stuff you did as a kid that you don't do anymore, things that you used to live for that you wouldn't dream of doing now. It's like, one winter day you just look out at kids sledding or making snow angels and long gone are the times when you would see such things and say 'Man, that looks like fun.' Now all you see is how dangerous it is, or you think about how much work it would be to dig out your big coat, and shit, I have no idea where my gloves might be, or if I get down on that sled I'm not sure I'll ever be able to stand up again. But really what you think is 'those stupid kids, it's freezing cold, why are they wasting their time out there?'"

He paused and grabbed a quick sip of his water. I had been resisting the temptation to interrupt him. I am awfully polite like that.

"I think that's awfully cynical" I said, quickly before he could continue. "Sure, different things may interest us now, but that's not a bad thing. We do the silly stuff like playing in the snow as kids because it is fun then, we don't mind finding our boots, or getting snow down our pants, and we love the homemade cocoa in our mugs when we finally do come inside. But hopefully we replace those things with new things, new interests, new things to make us feel silly and care-free if even just for a few minutes."

He shrugged his shoulders and nodded leaving me unsure if he was agreeing or not. There was a long pause. We seem to do that. Point, counterpoint, pause. It was ok though, we had days to do this, taking a few minutes to consider our responses seemed prudent. We looked at each other, wondering who was going to kick off the next round. I leaned over and turned up the radio while he kept driving.

The Three Legged Dog

Prompt: "dragged across the parking lot" • January 10, 2014

I know cross country driving is boring but this trip is exceptionally so. I find myself spending all my non-driving time just staring out the window. I tried to read but can't focus on it, reading the same pages three or four times, just not retaining it. I guess it is understandable that I am distracted, or that my mind is otherwise occupied but I don't want to think about all this shit all the time. I've been counting barns, well not really counting, but acknowledging them. Yup, there's a barn. Yup, another one. Wow, that barn looks like it's barely standing. Hey now, that's a nice barn. We just passed one though that looked really familiar. Familiar not in a "I'm sure I was here before" sort of way but in a "that sort of looks like that barn over on 34, you know the one with the three legged dog." Hah, I remember that stupid three legged dog even though it took me years to actually see it.

The three legged dog, most thought it was a myth, an urban legend. Not that three legged dogs don't exist, but very few had ever seen this particular one. They say it lives on a farm just off the highway there and as you pass, if it's out you can see it running around in the yard by the barn. It's either a Rottweiler or a Doberman, the inconsistency of the breed just fueling the fire of the legend. They always say you can't tell it's three legged by the way it runs. It gets around as well as the others despite the absence of that left rear limb.

In school, we'd gather in the cafeteria and listen as folks would tell their tale. Driving with their family, everyone, sometimes even the parents, with eyes peeled on that old farm for a glimpse of it as they passed by. Sometimes they'd slow down, traffic permitting, in hopes that would make a difference. Some would claim they saw it, add their own spin to the tale, but most would share their disappointment. They were going too fast, the dogs weren't out, they ran behind the barn before they could tell if it was out there or not.

I wasn't immune to this, neither was my dad. Every time we passed that way we would be sort of giddy at the chance to see the beast, we'd talk about how this was going to be the time for sure. We'd discuss how we would tell the story to our friends, his co-workers. The brave explorers out there proving the existence once and for all of the elusive animal. For years we tried, each time unsuccessfully. We'd often see dogs but could never really make out if he was among them.

When I turned 16 and got my drivers license I was determined to put an end to my quest once and for all. I'd drive by every chance I could get, eyes peeled. And then it happened. Janie and I were driving about and we decided to make a run past the house, not just on the highway but down the frontage road. We were going to see this dog.

We got off the highway at what we thought was the right exit and drove around looking for the familiar barn. Roads twisted and turned but eventually we saw it in the distance, this was it. We slowed down to a crawl as we drove past and almost screamed when we saw the dogs were out. Wait - was that it? Did you see it? I think I may have seen it. Not being sure, we turned around and made another run past. Janie swore she saw it but I still wasn't sure. I needed to know for sure. I turned around again and as we drove towards the house again, I made the turn in to the driveway and on to the area where the other cars and the tractor were parked.. Janie screamed "Gwen! What are you doing?" I heard but didn't respond. The no trespassing sign wasn't going to deter me either. I pulled up in to the main lot outside the barn and slowed to a stop. I peered in to the fenced pen and there he was. He was magnificent. A fine looking dog, perfect in every way except for the missing leg. He ran to the fence to greet us, along with the others. No silly missing leg was going to stop him from protecting his property. I made sure Janie was seeing it too, "Oh my god there it is, do you see it?" We were screaming at each other, squealing, nearly crying. We were so focused on the dogs that we didn't see the back porch door open until it was almost too late. A man was coming out, probably to see what was alarming the dogs.

"Holy Shit Gwen! Someone is coming out of the house!" Like coming out of a daze, I put the car in to reverse and did a three point turn in the lot to turn ourselves around. "I see him, I see him." I said. Janie is freaking out at this point, "Hurry the fuck up Gwen, he's still walking toward the car." We headed back towards the drive, I was afraid to look for the man in the rear view mirror. I was sure he had a shotgun pointed at the car, sure our rear view mirror would explode in to pieces as the pellets tore in to it, sure he had no objection to shooting at the pesky trespassers who were pissing of his dogs. Maybe he would grab on to the back of the car and be dragged across the parking lot. I sped up, shot down the driveway and back on to the road, my window still intact. Maybe he just missed?

"Did you see it? Did you see it? Did you see it?" Janie just kept saying it over and over again.

"Yes, I saw it, I never thought I would ever see it, but I saw it."

"Fuck, I wish we had a chance to take a picture, you know no one is going to fucking believe us when we tell them about it" Janie Said.

"Yeah, but we know what we saw, that fucking dog really exists." I said.

We did tell everyone, and generally people didn't believe us, or at least said they didn't. But I think they wanted it to be true, because you want to think that something like a three-legged dog could exist and that we wouldn't make such a thing up. We vowed to return again with a camera but we never did. I guess once we knew it was true, once we had seen it, proving it to others became less important. They should probably have their own adventure, their own chance to have their car shot at.

I smile a bit, thinking of Janie, of times when seeing a three legged dog was enough to pull you out of your world for a bit. I smile remembering how I told my dad all about it when I got home. Then I feel sad, and sorry that he never got the chance to see it for himself.

Rerouting

Prompt: "a quiet night in" • January 17, 2014

Ellie and I don't go out much anymore. We used to be more social, out for dinners and concerts, parties with friends, even just a quick drink after work. Now we usually just spend our free time at home, a quiet night in front of the TV. I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing, we like spending time together, but it's just another example of how much our relationship has changed. Maybe we've just developed that comfort some people get, just being together in our home is enough for us. I don't know. What I do know is that we've never talked about it, it wasn't a decision we made together, it's just something that we both accept as our new normal. Maybe she resents it, thinks it's something that I really want while she would rather be out and about like we used to do. I assume she is ok with it, that if she really wanted to go out more she would let me know. I would do more if she wanted to.

Things like that worry me. What else have we accepted? What other choices have we made without really making them? Why don't we talk about these things?

I know it's not just us, I can think of hundreds of examples in my own life, things I've accepted even though I never really thought about them. Decisions made because I didn't actually make a choice. And like the things that Ellie and I just accept, I have done the same, never stopping to think about the path that I am on, wondering if it is the right one, just moving forward as if my route has been set in place. Maybe I needed to take an alternate route, let my inner GPS yell at me for a bit, "Rerouting - make a u-turn and do that thing you were supposed to do."

I don't know, it's all a bit too much for me, rationalizing things, explaining the unexplainable, justifying my behavior. In the end it doesn't much matter, I am here, I fucked up, and I don't know what to do next.

The Secret

Prompt: "waiting to tell you" • January 31, 2014

One side of a conversation, the sharing of a secret, a secret kept for too many years.

It was my secret, or it used to be a secret. I figure once you tell someone it ceases to be a secret any longer. Now you know too.

I never thought about why I didn't tell you earlier, it wasn't like I was waiting to tell you on a specific day or anything, it was just my secret and I have never told anyone.

No, never.

I wanted to tell you earlier, but I've never told anyone.

Because I felt like I needed to tell you today, because it was hurting you, even though you didn't know about it.

Yes, that is why I'm not comfortable there, I just tried to endure it, not to make a scene.

I don't think I can do that anymore.

I'm the peacemaker, I'm not the one to make problems.

Please don't cry, I didn't mean to upset you.

It caused me so much hurt, maybe I was trying to protect everyone.

No, not him. I don't think so anyway.

I've never confronted him or asked him about it. You know how my family works, we just ignore things.

No, I don't think they knew. I hope they didn't anyway, that would make it worse, them knowing and not doing anything to stop it.

I don't think I can ask them.

I was 7.

You can be angry.

I don't think I got angry until later. I don't remember even thinking about it much before that really, but I can see so many connections now.

Yes, so much makes sense now. Doesn't it?

I don't think I repressed it, I just sort of pretended that it didn't matter, that it had no effect on me, I gave it no power.

Yeah, the ubiquitous box metaphor, make it really small, hide it away somewhere.

I didn't really deny that it happened, I tried to minimize the consequences.

Good in theory maybe. Reality was obviously different.

I certainly think it played a part, that anger had to go somewhere. The drugs obviously meant to minimize the pain.

It never works, does it?

Yeah, I was 17. Pills. I was hospitalized. Even then I never said anything.

No, I don't know what to do next.

I love you too.

The Best He Could Do

Prompt: "the ghostwriter" • February 7, 2014

He stared at the bare white screen as it sat open in his writing program, taunting him, staring back at him. Every time he tabbed through desktops he saw it and felt a pang of anxiety, then guilt, and then as the deadline approached, panic. Unlike a lot of writers who readily admit their fear of a blank page, he usually embraced it, his usual response was that he could write anything on a blank page, it was one that already had shit on it that scared him. With his first novel in revision for months, it was even true.

Once he got started writing the words would usually flow pretty easily. With music carefully selected and earphones blocking out the rest of the world, it was easy for him to get lost. Thousands of words pouring out his fingers, speed limited only by his typing, words generated much faster than he could put them down, as if the ghostwriter within was channeling them in from another plane.

Not this week though, there was nothing, no inspiration, no spark, the white wordless screen a reminder of his failings. He tried multiple playlists, his go to albums falling flat. Early in the morning, late at night, on the couch, at his desk, trying to find the combination that would get the ball rolling, get those first few words out of his head and on to his screen. Nothing seems to work and as the clock passes 11PM he considers just skipping out for the week, hoping that the next will be better. That doesn't sit well with him though so he scrambles, forces himself to sit down and just type something, and I guess this is the best he could do.

The Bar

Prompt: "you've had a few" • February 14, 2014

Jim sat at the end of the bar, the same spot he has taken every night for the last 24 years. His head hung down, staring at the aged bar top, seeing the dings and scratches that gave the old oak beauty its charm and character. He didn't drink when the bar was open, he was usually standing on the other side, pouring drinks for the folks who came in to see him. After he closed and locked the doors though, he would pour himself a single shot of Jack and close out the cash drawer. It was his routine, he never varied it. That was Jim, full of routine, never varying.

He had taken over the bar when his father died, a temporary arrangement that he eventually let become permanent. His "I can watch over it for a month" turned in to two, then six, then a year, and then he bought the bar outright from his mom. It wasn't what he planned for himself but he enjoyed the people his place drew, local folks, hard working folks, his regulars. There was always some turnover and fresh blood but he had gotten to know his regulars, his friends, and he was able to make a decent living doing something he enjoyed.

The jukebox played the last of its chosen numbers while he began to count out the money from the day, the flickering Budweiser sign casting a red shade on his work. He sorted and counted, each bill turned and faced so that they were all the same. He leaves out just enough to fill the drawer for the next day, the remainder assembled in to bands and bagged up for the bank, a deposit slip always properly totaled tucked in the front. He takes the bag and the drawer around to the other side of the bar and places them both in the safe hidden in the back of the old Schlitz keg, being sure to roll it back in to its proper place when done.

Standing behind the bar now he once again looks down at the oak topped classic. Much of the rest of the place has been updated over the years but the bar has remained unchanged. He thinks to himself "You've had a few close calls, but you've always managed to survive" and for a second he isn't sure whether he is talking about himself or the bar. He notices the quiet, only the buzzing of the neon breaks the silence. He thought about going home. He thought of how empty his house was now that Mary had passed. He grabbed his glass but rather than washing it and placing it on the shelf as he has done thousands of nights before, he grabs a bottle and pours himself another.

I Love Those Eyes

Prompt: "just for a moment, let's be still" • February 21, 2014

The last few months have been a whirlwind for us, added to our normal busy work schedules we've both been spending a lot of time helping out my dad and working around all of the scheduling challenges that his care is throwing our way. Trips to the doctor, his chemo, lab appointments, shopping, and just generally being there for him when he needs us. The change hasn't been easy, I mean it's hard enough to deal with him being sick but for everything that I do outside of my normal routine, Ellie has been picking up the slack, and we're both getting tired. I don't mean that either of us resents it, it's just a challenge, a disruption of our normal routine. I'm a creature of habit, comfortable with things when they stay the same, and this has been anything but same.

When it became clear that Dad wasn't going to get better and we just couldn't do all of what we needed to do on our own, we connected with a local hospice and got some help. Claire came to us very highly recommended and we fell in love with her the very first time we met her, just so nice and caring, and so genuine. She and Dad got along well and she started to take care of some of the day to day things, giving Ellie and I a bit of a break.

It was hard for me to give it up though. I guess I had gotten so used to the doing, the running, that when we finally did get a break, I didn't know what to do with myself, and then the guilt comes in. Shouldn't I be there with him, wasn't I doing a good enough job of taking care of him?

It was a few weeks after Claire started and she was doing wonderful with Dad. Ellie and I had just finished our dinner and were sitting at the table. I was sorting some coupons I had been tucking away when I looked up and said "Hey El, I was thinking I would run over to Dad's for a bit, see how he's doing, maybe bring him some ice cream."

"Oh" she said, looking up from her latest read. "I was hoping we could just hang out at home tonight, light a fire, maybe just veg out and relax. It's been so long since we've had any time to ourselves."

I could see the disappointment on her face and yet I didn't know how to respond. It wasn't that I didn't want to spend time with her, I just didn't know how to stop all that I had been doing, to set it aside.

"I don't know El, I just feel like I should go check up on him, Claire is probably gone, he's alone" I was scrambling for an excuse, a reason to go, to leave.

With that she sets her bookmark, reaches across the table and grabs my hands. I can feel her eyes on me.

"Gwen, look at me." I toss down my coupons and raise my head to meet her eyes. I love those eyes. "You don't need to prove anything to me Gwen, I know you love your dad, I know this is hard to deal with, I know it's overwhelming, but you need to take care of you too, we need to take care of us."

She was right of course. So many people had said the same thing to us, telling us how important it was, as a caregiver, to make sure we weren't ignoring our own needs. It's a common thing, I knew it could happen, knew it was happening right now.

She said "We've been running and running for months Gwen, and it's ok, but we've got a chance to stop and breathe. Let's put everything aside even if it's just for one night. We can stop running. Tonight, just for a moment, let's be still."

And with those words I remembered all of the reasons that I am with her, all of the reasons I love her, and as I stared in to her eyes, and held her hands, just for a moment we were still.

Rerouting

Prompt: "because sometimes it doesn't" • March 7, 2014

I had hoped to fill this out a bit more but wasn't feeling well today, and of course I waited until the last minute so.... This is another fill-in scene from my current work in progress - Gwen reflecting on her year, and what a year it's been.

I guess, for many folks, New Year's Eve is a time for reflection. They make a big deal about it as this major transition, but it's really just another day if you think about it. Eventually days turn to weeks, then months, and then enough of them pass to up the digits in the year column, but really it's still just one day later than the day before. I never really understood why people made such a fuss, making their resolutions, kissing and crying and all that sort of shit.

As a kid Dad and I would just stay at home, maybe have a few close friends over. With my mom's accident I've always been terrified of drunken drivers and New Years amplifies that fear so even when I got older I would never go out and be on the roads. Ellie and I kept up that routine for the few we've spent together, movies and wine and sushi, home and safe together. Not this year of course, this year I'm alone, and I can't help but think back on the past year and how much has changed.

I've always been the kind of person that plans things, considers things. I'm not a "I have my whole life mapped out" person but I was anything but flighty, or spontaneous. I always thought I had a vision of the type of person I wanted to be, the type of life I wanted to live. Maybe not a fully developed story, but at least an outline, with waypoints and markers along the way to make sure I hadn't gone astray.

It's a nice thought to want life to work out that way but you can't count on that because sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes? Fuck, who am I kidding, it never turns out that way, that's not how it works. Life throws shit in your path, closes roads and gives you construction, and if you aren't paying attention you end up going someplace you didn't intend to. A wrong turn here, another one missed back there, oh shit was I supposed to take that exit or is it the next one? If this was happening in my car I would hear a nice lady with a slightly British sounding voice alert me that I had veered off path followed by friendly directions to get back on course.

That's what happened to me I guess and so I sit here alone, without my Mom, without my Dad, without Ellie. How did I get here?

Rerouting! Rerouting!

Moley Moley Moley

Prompt: "The mole had returned" • March 28, 2014

I started this hoping it would go somewhere, that I'd have an idea to make it interesting. I didn't. Guess everything can't be something. I did learn a bit about moles though.

A Mole. I'd heard of them but I had no idea they were around here, and I sure had no idea how much damage they could do to my yard. I'm not one of those fanatical 'my lawn must be perfectly green and trimmed and beautiful' guys but I do tend to prefer that it's not full of fucking holes. Sure, my sprained ankle would heal but until I could get rid of the mole my yard would never be the same.

Like most any problem one has, the Internet was full of experts telling me how I could get rid of my problem. Too many experts, too many solutions. I did learn that despite the numerous holes it was likely just one mole, scrounging for food, creating a network of tunnels beneath my lawn.

First I tried flooding. Find the main tunnel, pop in the hose and let loose a torrent of water to either force the mole out of my yard or better yet, drown the fucker. I pictured the water coming out of all the holes like in Caddyshack but it was quite anti-climactic. The water flowed through the tunnels, I saw no sign of the mole, I turned off the water and then waited.

A few days later I see a tunnel running out of my yard and in to the park behind my house. I celebrate, I flip a middle finger to my mole friend, and I start to go about repairing the damage.

I guess it wasn't going to be that easy though. Just as things were starting to look better I noticed the familiar holes and tunnels returning. The mole had returned. I thought I had won but I guess we have to call this a draw. Time for round two.

I decided I needed to up my game so I did some more research online and decided to try some mousetraps. I tried bacon. No luck. Pepperoni. Nope. Peanut Butter. Nada. Salami. Every fucking thing you can think about putting on a trap got put on a trap but no luck. Mole wins this one.

Did you know there are six different kinds of moles in North America? I can identify them now.

Vinegar. Shovels and hammers. Custom mixtures of soap and pepper and all sorts of shit. I tried them all. Castor Oil. Dry Ice. I tried in the morning, in the evening. It didn't seem to matter. More water. He'd disappear for a bit but then he'd be back again, always returning.

I honestly think I tried everything I could find, well except one way, and honestly I always thought it was a joke. I was ready to try it though. I just needed a shotgun.

I'm not a gun guy really. Never been hunting, not comfortable with a gun in the house but, no pun intended, I had to give this a shot...

So new 12 gauge in hand, I went out one morning to wait for my little friend. I'd seen him move around before but I'd never been able to catch him, maybe the shell would be faster than I could be. So I waited, and waited some more until I could see the movement through the tunnels. I put the gun to my shoulder, aimed and fired....

Buy Yourself Something Nice...

Prompt: "the priest just kinda' laughed" • April 11, 2014

It was a beautiful day, warm and clear, perfect for a wedding. This wasn't just any wedding though, this was Tony's wedding, and he was the first of our group to get married. We all knew it was going to be him, he and Sarah had been going out forever and it was really just a matter of time before they made it official. We were expecting it.

What I wasn't expecting was being asked to be the best man. Of course I was honored, but it was very intimidating. I'd never been a best man before. In fact I've only stood up in a wedding once before, as a groomsman, and that turned in to sort of a disaster. I will never forget how my female bridesmaid counterpart fainted during the ceremony so I was forced to walk down the aisle solo as we all departed.

I discovered that there really wasn't a whole lot to do as best man other than to just be with the groom and make sure he was ok, had what he needed, and really I would do that anyway. To be honest the most demanding thing about the ceremony didn't involve my best man duties at all. It was a fancy church mass sort of wedding and I had never been a part of one of those before. Someone mentioned that there would be communion and since I was in the bridal party the priest was going to come over to us and offer it rather than us going in to the line. I'd never been in a position where someone offered me communion before and I really had no idea what to do. I mean as a humanist former jew would it be worse to take the communion or to refuse it? I had no problem doing whatever, I didn't want to make a scene but neither option seemed like a good choice.

It was really nerve-wracking and finally I had the chance to get the priest aside to ask him his advice. I said that I wanted to be respectful but I wasn't sure what the best option was. The priest just kinda' laughed and said that no one takes communion, one receives it and that it was ok to ask to be passed over. I responded with my own laugh when he said passed over because it made me think of Passover where jews drink wine and eat their own flat bread.... religious synchronicity catch it. I kept my comments to myself though and turned to walk away before I remembered that another of my responsibilities was to pay him for performing the ceremony. I probably should have waited until after he did it but I figured if I can't trust a priest...

I took the envelope of cash from my tuxedo pocket, folded it and turned back to the priest to catch his attention. I extended my hand as if in a handshake and said "here's a little something for you" as I palmed him his payment, clasp my other hand over his to make sure he had it before turning to walk away.

The End

Prompt: "It was fun while it lasted" • May 30, 2014

"I know I fucked up" I said, my head down, afraid to look in to her eyes. I waited for a response which didn't come.

This is the first relationship ending that really means something to me. Before Ellie it's always been hang out a bit until one side gets bored. Go to a trendy restaurant so you're in public and around a bunch of other people and someone, it doesn't really matter who, gives the other the "we've had a good run" or "I really like you but.." or maybe even a "it was fun while it lasted." The dumper pays the tab, you have a fake little hug outside the door and both people go on their own merry way. I've done that, been there, on both sides. Sometimes it hurts a little but usually you're not close enough to care that much. It's more inconvenient than anything.

This wasn't like that. This was different. I may have thought I loved some of the others but I see now that I never did. Not like this. Not like Ellie.

I raise my head a bit, I can tell she's crying. I know I am. I start to say something else and she interrupts me.

"Stop. Just Stop. I need you to just stop talking" she says, so I do. I try to establish eye contact with her, I need to see the hurt in her eyes and hopefully she'll see the regret in mine. I want us both to just burst out laughing, the absurdity of the circumstances that brought us to this place trumping the pain but there's nothing funny here, we can't laugh this off. This is the end.

The One Where They Are Sitting At The Bar..

Prompt: "Despite what all the studies have shown" • September 5, 2014

It is a typical Friday night, sitting at the bar with some friends, some strangers, and some strange friends. As usually happens, the alcohol loosens our lips and all manner of discussion is had. It usually starts with sports, football season is starting so there are many predictions and analyzing fantasy teams. Attempts to shift the conversation to baseball fail and we're back to football's off field exploits, suspensions and fines.

I'm not much of a sports guy so I am mostly silent during this phase of the discussion. To be honest, I'm not overly social in this type of situation regardless of the topic but when it comes to sports I know I am out of my league against these guys so I nod my head and shrug my shoulders and drink my beer and hope we can soon start talking about something else.

Oh great, someone mentions politics. On this I have opinions but I know better than to share them, especially with this group. I try to avoid rolling my eyes when Joe goes on his anti-Obama tirade. It's the same one from last week so he must have been too busy to be told what to be newly outraged at this week. Thankfully we all are able to restrain ourselves from jumping in. Even Tom, who is about as conservative as a guy can be, holds his tongue. Nothing good ever happens when the discussion goes here and we all know it. Joe gets bored when his sparring attempts go unanswered and he moves to an empty chair and orders another beer. Someone mentions a stupid statement from the sports commentator during last night's broadcast and thankfully we dodge the political bullet, at least for now.

Sports gets followed by what I like to call the complaining portion of the evening. Someone's boss was an asshole which leads us to decide that all of our bosses are assholes. Money is next, kids need school supplies and braces. Cars need brakes. Houses need windows. Backed up sewer lines, broken dishwashers. This is also the regret portion of our evening. Shouldn't have bought that house, should have bought a different car, and maybe one of us goes down the shouldn't have had kids road. Drunks and regrets are a bad combination and I notice it's gotten really quiet. Fresh beers all around I say, desperately trying to think of something to say, something pleasant, something non-confrontational. I wish we had our very own Cliff Clavin to impart some bit of wisdom upon us. He would say something like "Despite what all the studies have shown, while the African swallow and the European swallow do have similar air-speed velocities, neither would be able to carry a one pound coconut" and we would all carry on with that discussion, maybe wondering if perhaps they used a line between them it might work.

Rather than that though, it stays quiet and the discussion mostly stops. We occasionally comment about whatever is happening on the TV, but mostly we sit and drink, and we think about our lives, and why we are there, and whether we should maybe just have another beer.

Untitled

Prompt: "count your blessings" • September 12, 2014

These are characters from a story I started to write a few years ago but never completed. I think it was too grand a concept in its first iteration but I have always loved them and the general theme so I guess this is a reintroduction / revisiting of them for possible future use.

When T reached the age where he began to develop his own ideas about god and spirituality, he decided that god really hadn't done him many favors. His mom had always told him to "count your blessings," something he figured he could do on one hand. There was music and there was Courtney, and really, he wasn't sure that god should be taking credit for either. Maybe blessings weren't always supposed to be good? Maybe his alcoholic mother and abusive father were somehow meant to be, but he could never reconcile that. In a sense, they were responsible for him and sometimes they even provided him some basic necessities like food and shelter, but if they were blessings, they were pretty crappy ones.

Courtney was his neighbor, his best friend, his sometimes lover, and in the grandest scheme of things he didn't really know about or understand, she was his protector. T was right about one thing, it wasn't god that gave him Courtney. It wasn't random, and it wasn't natural, but it had nothing to do with god. The thing that T didn't realize was that he was indeed blessed, blessed with a power that hadn't quite appeared yet, blessed with a purpose of great importance, blessed with talent that hadn't quite matured, and a voice that hadn't quite figured out what to say.

She was there to make sure all of these things happened. Those who don't know and don't understand might call her something like his guardian angel but there was nothing angelic about Courtney, she certainly wasn't heaven-sent. Given some of the things she had done to protect T, Courtney didn't see her given role as much of a blessing either.

The Empty Bunk

Prompt: "out there in the dark" • September 26, 2014

6am - I hear the rumblings outside as the night pilots come in from their overnight runs and the next batch prepares for their day shifts. Things have been quiet, at least in terms of action, but in terms of what wakes me up in the morning, this bit here has always done it. The planes are loud but then there are the resource vehicles, beeping and buzzing, removing cargo and refilling fuel. I always say "No one can sleep through that, unless they're dead" and I believe that is true.

I try to peek out but the ash on the windows makes that impossible. Not that I could see anything anyway, everything is done with infrared, no lights are ever used on the tarmacs. I don't think a lot about what's happening out there in the dark, I'm not part of the mining team and it's all very foreign to me. Shit, I've only been out there twice, once when I first arrived and the other, well, I don't like to think about the other time.

Once I get over the suddenness of it, I'm actually grateful for the daily wake-up. The lack of day and night cycles makes life difficult here, the daily 6am shift change and it's evening counterpart are the only indicator I have to break the days apart. I curse it but I can't imagine life here without it.

I glance over at the empty bunk on the other side of the room. They've never assigned me another roommate, we've never talked about it, I don't think it's anything official, they just haven't. I am usually grateful but sometimes, like this morning, the dark gets to me and I feel alone.

A Really Soft Hoodie

Prompt: "tie me down" • October 3, 2014

"What?" I had heard him, but I couldn't believe he said what it sounded like he said.

"I need you to tie me down. Before midnight. Before it happens." He's calm. How can he be calm?

"Before what happens?" I ask. "Shit dude, you're freaking me out." Me, I'm not so calm.

He continues "I don't have time to explain it now. I mean, you took your sweet old time getting here, I just need you to hurry up and tie me down." He hands me an assortment of items to use and I sort through them looking for something strong enough to hold him.

"You maybe should have told me to bring rope or something, how am I supposed to tie you down with this shit?"

"Seriously, you need to stop talking and do this, we're running out of time." He is starting to sound not so calm.

I find a sheet and I tear it up in to strips. He lays himself prone on his bed and I take the first and tie his right hand to the heavy bed-frame, followed by his left on the other side. I say "This is fucked up dude, it's freaking me out."

"Don't think about it, just do it. Please!" Really not calm at all now.

"OK, OK, I'm doing it, it's just really weird. I've never tied anyone down before." I don't really even know that I am talking, it's awkward, I'm tying my friend to his bed and I don't know why and I can't shut myself up. I use up all the sheet pieces and he doesn't look very well secured. I grab various other pieces of clothing and start tying those together to make something long enough to go around his waist, down under the bed and back up again. I think maybe if I can keep him from moving around too much, he won't have any leverage to loosen anything. I tie some jeans to some nice dress pants, add some long sleeve shirts to the mix and then I find a hoodie at the bottom of the pile.

I'm trying not to make eye contact with him but I give him a glance to see if he is ok. He's not agitated now but who knows what will happen when, well, whatever is going to happen, happens.

I attach the clothes rope to the left sleeve of the hoodie and start to feed it under the bed before moving to the other side to bring it up on top of him. I check all the knots to be sure they are tight before finding the loose right sleeve to start to pull it tight around him. The hoodie is super soft, seriously soft. I decide I want one just like it so I look at the tag to see what it's made of. Fleece it says.

I pull the clothes rope as tight as I can and tie up the final knots, still admiring the gray hoodie. I stand up triumphantly, I think he's about as secure as I can make it. As I double check the rest of the knots I say "Man, that hoodie is really soft. It's fleece. Did you know that the plural of fleece is fleece?" I think to ask him where he got it but then think better of it. Maybe this isn't the right time. No response from him.

I see him trying to stay relaxed, to control his breathing. I give him a "what now" shoulder shrug and ask "Do you think that will be good enough?" I mean, he looks sort of secured but who knows how much he'll fight to get free.

"I guess it will have to be, I mean we don't have time to do anything else.... Hey, you should probably go" he says, and for the first time I see real fear in his face.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stick around, make sure you're ok?" I ask, desperately hoping he says no.

"I'm very sure that's not a good idea, please just be sure to close everything up before you leave, and don't come back until after Midnight tomorrow. It should all be ok by then." He makes a point to test the knots, pulling his hands and feet, making sure they are tight. He seems satisfied.

I start to say something else but he hushes me. "You've really got to go. You can't be here. You just can't."

I grab my backpack and close his bedroom door on my way out. I think about hanging around but now I'm scared. I want to get as far away from here as I possibly can. I hurry out of the house and by the time I reach the street I am running, far too afraid to look back, who knows what might be following me.

The Airport

Prompt: "a place to land" • October 10, 2014

It's kind of short but it came out of nowhere in just a few minutes. Some times that scares me.

Dark. Not too dark, but dark. I can see shapes and shadows but nothing more. It's how I like it, like everything is in black and white, easy to process. A fairly steady stream of people come and go in the next room but in here there is no movement, or at least it seems that way, the drugs can skew time, make things go real slow. Again, it's how I like it.

I like this room. It's not where I live but it often feels like home, or what I wish home was. I can't go home when I'm like this but when I'm coming down and need a place to land I can't be out in the world, I need the quiet and the dark. Especially the dark. This is that place.

You really want to know what this place is? It's an airport. The outer room there is for take-offs, you buy your ticket and start your trip, be it with needle or spoon, it doesn't matter. You fly, unobstructed, no walls or barriers, the world is open and free and you can do anything. When it's done, you come back here so you can land gracefully. It's safe here. If you try to land out in the world who knows where you'll end up, what you'll hit on the way down. In here, you can take your time, descend slowly, land softly.

Some folks never land. They just keep extending their flights, taking another trip, but I never could do that. I need the stop even if it's only a short layover before going out again. I mean I like the trip for sure, but I love the landing, the coming down is my favorite part.

Drink Until I Forget

Prompt: "a very passable imitation" • October 17, 2014

I don't know why but I had an insanely difficult time getting this one started, and it just got worse from there. It's 250 words exactly and probably not worth reading. Ugh.

I'm not surprised that it isn't a good martini. At best, I was hoping for a very passable imitation but whatever it is that he poured in to this glass doesn't even meet that lowly criteria. I think about asking for another, or something else, but I've put worse things in my body and I imagine there has to be alcohol of some sort in it. That's really all I'm after anyway.

It's nice to find a bar in an out of the way place and this one certainly meets that criteria. This is one of those places that you maybe drive past on your way to someplace else but it's never your destination. It's a dark place, a lone neon Hamm's sign in the window is the only indication that it is in fact a bar. If you pay attention you would notice the same four cars in the parking lot, no matter when you pass. If you do decide to go in, you might regret it at first. They'll stare but if you play it cool they'll go back to their business.

While the Cheers theme makes a place "where everyone knows your name" sound like a good thing, sometimes anonymity is best. I don't want anyone to know me, to ask me questions, I'd rather they not even acknowledge my presence. I want to sit in this booth, alone, and drink. Drink until I'm drunk. Drink until I forget why I'm drinking. Drink until I forget everything.

Finnegan's Five

Prompt: "mix things up a bit" • October 31, 2014

Short but sure gets me thinking. Setting this one aside to maybe turn in to something later.

It's the third Friday of the month, Poker night for the Finnegan's Five. Finnegan's, of course, the famous bar out on Old Route 4. You've likely seen it in movies, television shows, and if nothing else, in the news when that big terrible mess with Willie Sean went down. Boy, if that sure didn't mix things up a bit.

There are always five for Poker, has been that way for years. Not much is known about the monthly game held in the now famous back room. The room itself is a mystery, tucked away in the back, hidden but not really. Everyone knows about the room but very few have actually been inside. It's funny to hear people talk about it, the rumors and stories are abundant and while everyone thinks there are bits of truth in all of them, it's clear that it has taken on a mythic status.

I've heard them all I think. One might tell of it being a palace like structure, grandiose and fitted with luxurious trappings. The players dressed in black-tie à la James Bond, sipping Martinis with beautiful women attached to their elbows. Others insist it's like walking back in time, the room being kept exactly as it was when it was built back in 1890. A bartender pours whiskey which is brought to the old poker table by a mini-skirted barmaid, and an ace up your sleeve is likely to get you shot with a six-shooter that each player keeps close at hand.

In truth, the thing you need to know about the back room at Finnegan's is that it's certainly not set up for Poker. While the Finnegan's Five do indeed meet there once a month, on the third Friday, no one has played cards in that room for nearly a hundred years. You see, while wagering has always been the purpose of the meeting, the stakes are now much higher than a few chips tossed down on a green-felted table. Now when these five meet, lives are held in the balance and no one is exempt from being a part of the games that these very powerful men play.