2000 Second Place Personal Narrative

Marvin and Georgean

I had never made biscuits and gravy before. The blessings of having a good cook as a Mom were abundant, but alas, I never did learn the many techniques that wonder woman possessed. My repertoire included: peanut butter cookies, a deliciously heated can of Pork n Beans, and Rice Krispie treats that were always too crunchy. But, Marvin wanted biscuits and gravy, so that is what Marvin got.

His sister told me the recipe over the phone. Marvin had called her up long distance and gruffly demanded that she rattle off the legendary gravy recipe that their mother used to serve. She did so, and I obediently jotted down every word. The directions seemed simple enough, and I felt confidant that Marvin would enjoy my gravy. So thoroughly, in fact, that he would be instantly taken back to the carefree days of his youth. I enthusiastically announced that he better prepare his stomach for a scrumptious, hot off the grill meal the following day. He laughed, and said that I couldn t even make a bowl of cereal right. I laughed too, remembering back to the time when I spaced out and poured orange juice over his shredded wheat.

At the crack of dawn the next morning, I crawled out of bed, brushed my teeth, and drowsily drove to 1270 Karen Way in my plaid boxers and Watsa Matta U? sweatshirt. The antique yet picturesque fifties neighborhood home welcomed my tired body once again. My second home I called it. The door was always open, and the air always chilly inside. The first thing I saw, like every morning, was a long clear air tube sprawled out on the white linoleum tiles, leading to where the kitchen table was around the corner. My heart filled with complete joy when I heard the tubes crisp crack as it whipped the floor, a sign that Marvin knew I was in.

Good morning Marvin! I shouted. Dropping my purse by the door, I anxiously sprinted around the corner to where I could see my little old man. Weak and frail, he sat for hours on the same wooden chair, pulled up against the same cluttered table. An array of newspaper, grocery store, and the local five cent classifieds dominated every inch--they were his life.

Marvin was searching for a three-wheeled motor scooter. He wanted to be able to chase his wife, Georgean, down the street when her Alzheimer s took her into fits of hysteria. His current physical condition prevented him from doing so, but with a cart all Marvin had to do was sit back and hang on to the portable nebulizer that helped him breath. Each morning we would search the classifieds, but each morning we would be disappointed. I don t think very many people in Salem owned three-wheeled motor scooters.

You already got your coffee? I asked, noticing his favorite Snoopy Christmas coffee mug near the newest issue of Oregonian s classifieds. He shook his head and closed his eyes, concentrating on breathing deeply. Breathing in the morning was always significantly more difficult for Marvin, and even a simple sentence was demanding.

Ahh that s all right man. I said, and while pouring him his daily cup of half coffee/half cream, I filled him in on the latest scoop in my social life. I didn t know if Marvin was exactly interested in what my friends and I did the night before, but it made him smile, and I loved to see the glow in his eye when he would tease me about never having a real date.
Marvin... I would counter, threatening him with my foot an inch above his breathing tube. That always brought about a light chuckle between the two of us.

While Marvin was momentarily consumed in his deliciously brewed lukewarm coffee, I shouted I am going to go check on Georgean! Marvin was hard of hearing. It took me a few days to feel comfortable constantly blaring every syllable that left my lips, but once I got the hang of it I would scream everything without a moments thought. Too often found myself yelling during my evening shifts at Dairy Queen, and it wasn t until I made a frightened five-year-old cry that I realized I needed to carefully watch my volume.

That morning, like many others, I found Georgean in a state of confusion. Standing by her bedside, her bony legs, like frail twigs, stood bare against the pink flannel pajama top that hung just below her saggy buttocks. With a plastic sanitary napkin in her shaking hand, she looked up at me as I entered the dimly lit room. Her eyes were filled with tears, and by her stutter I knew that her mind would not create the words her mouth knew to speak.

Here Georgean, let me help you. I said, gently taking the thick pad from her hand. I remembered the first time that this had happened, only days after I had begun to come regularly. I had been bewildered, and repulsed at what I finally realized I had to do. Just think of her as a baby I told myself, and took care of the rest.

Later on Georgean was sitting next to Marvin at the table, asleep, and Marvin was still sipping at his coffee. Knowing they were content, I took out the crinkled scribbled recipe from my purse. I carefully studied every step, and mentally acted them out in my head. Heat frying pan on stove, half cup of oil in pan, half cup of milk in pan, stir, beef bits in pan, cup of flour in pan, stir, and bravo, finished! It was so straightforward, and with the already made biscuit dough at 325 degrees in the oven I was home free! Marvin would get his passionately desired breakfast, and I would have another item to add to my limited menu in Rebecca s Wanna-Be a Cook Cookbook.

Like a real professional chef, I neatly set the Pillsbury dough in the oven, and began to sizzle the oil, milk, and beef. The mixture of grease and chunky meat didn t look too appetizing, but I knew once the flour was added a beautiful thing would emerge. Unfortunately it didn t quite turn out that way. To my utter surprise, I soon became knowledgeable in the fact that an excess amount of flour in boiling grease was flammable.

Smoke billowed and swirled everywhere in a matter of seconds. The kitchen, family room, and hallway were gray and clouded, and I coughed and laughed all at the same time. Through the thick smolder I could see Marvin chuckling and shaking his head all too knowingly. Georgean was still peacefully dozing away.

The smoke alarm went off almost immediately after the thick cloud reached the hallway, and the walls of both the house and my ear drums began to vibrate. Frustrated I laughed my way over to the alarm, chair and towel in hand. I tried and tried, but to no avail, I could not turn the constant ringing off. The smoke alarm was so high tech that it didn t have a battery, so my usual rip it out method failed miserably.

I fanned the hallway, opened all the doors and windows, and turned on the air conditioning. But the only results were stares from the road when cars drove by with their windows down. Two o clock rolled around quite slowly, and when I realized the alarm had been ringing for about two hours, I decided to give up my futile attempt and sit down next to Marvin and Georgean. So there we sat, Georgean, Marvin, and I, for another hour. Georgean was still peacefully dozing away, occasionally waking up and fretting over where she was, and Marvin just turned the T.V. on full blast to his favorite Spanish channel. I, on the other hand, concentrated on interpreting Lolita Lopez s words, comforting Georgean s confused pleas, and ignoring the sharp throb in my ears.

All was well in the house of ringing, until an additional faint ringing was heard. It was Marvin s son s live-in girlfriend, and she was coming home early. Trying to muffle the smoke alarm in the background, I cheerfully said okay as politely as the word can be spoken, and then felt my stomach drop when I hung up the phone. I
clearly remembered the time I put a rose in a cup, and not a vase, for Georgean. Nancy, the girlfriend, told
Larry, the son, that I wasn’t mature enough for the job. If the mixing of flowers and cups could upset Queen
Nancy of Karen Way, I trembled to think of her reaction when she learned that the radiating sound waves from
her home were most likely strong enough to create a radio station.

My mind ran through the numerous ways I could stop the stupid smoke alarm. None of them had worked so far,
and I felt like I was living that nightmare where your muscles freeze and you’re forced to watch the bad guy run
towards you. Nancy would come home, yell and scream, fire me, and then I would cry. Marvin would be
forgotten, and the change in constancy would terrify Georgean. I had to think of something…and then I did. I
was ecstatic! I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it before! Since the alarm didn’t have a battery, it was
probably run by electricity. And the house’s electricity was controlled by circuit breakers. All I had to do was
turn off the power, and then the sound would stop! I wasn’t quite sure what Marvin would think of my
ingenious plan, so I figured it would be better if I just ran down to the basement and flipped the switches real
quick. He wouldn’t mind if it worked, right?

The basement was meticulously organized, thanks to Nancy, so the gray metal box that held the breakers was
easy to spot. Unfortunately, most of them weren’t specifically labeled, so I settled for the large one at the
bottom marked Main. I reckoned I was just about desperate for any possible solution.

The alarm did not stop. The on was switched to off, but the deafening beat of the alarm continued. Maybe it will
take a minute to fade. I thought, trying to remain optimistic. So there I stood, down in the cold basement,
patiently waiting to hear a decline in the unvarying blare.

Nothing changed, but I did notice a not so subtle tapping on the ceiling above.

What on earth is Marvin doing? I wondered.

The tapping did not stop, and finally, rolling my eyes, I walked back upstairs to see what endearing joke he was
going to crack this time.

My heart stopped. As I turned the corner and walked into the kitchen, my heart literally dropped so far into my
stomach that I instantly felt a rush of nausea. There sat Marvin, my precious little Marvin, eyes wide open,
gasping for breath. It was then that I realized the complete stupidity in my thoughtless actions. Marvin’s
nebulizer, his breathing machine, had been shut down when my absentminded fingers meddled so carelessly
with that darned gray box.

The fastest I have ever run was in those moments. Down the stairs, to the circuit breakers, back upstairs, and to
the nebulizer. I stood anxiously by Marvin’s side, praying when his breathing was teetering, and almost
laughing when he began to smile. And Marvin did smile. Within a few minutes of that awful, terrible incident,
he chuckled his familiar you are so stupid laugh that I so dearly loved. Tears in my eyes, I guess I laughed
pretty hard too. It was funny I had to admit. Georgean slept through all of it, but we let her in on the experience
when she awoke, and even she showed her pearly whites in appreciation for her husband’s near death
experience.

Needless to say, the alarm did not shut off. Nancy came home, and I knew she was more than upset when she
told me that I made her day a living hell. Larry arrived shortly after, and when he couldn’t figure out how to
turn it off either, he grabbed a pair of scissors and snipped some wires. By then the alarm had been on for four
hours.

Nancy stopped greeting me every morning, and Larry didn’t come home for lunch as often as he use too, but my
days with the Wiseman’s still continued. Marvin and I got pretty good at reading facial expressions on our
Spanish channel, and Georgean and I began to take daily walks to keep her awake. I never did cook much after
that, but Marvin's eyes shone bright whenever I brought in some already cooked gravy to heat in the microwave. During my last week there Marvin was admitted into the I.C.U. section of the Salem Hospital, and in a matter of days his body resembled those seen in the photographs of concentration camp survivors. Each day Georgean sat by his hospital bed, talking about home, and about little kittens that looked like airplanes. When I came in to say goodbye the day before I left for college, I couldn't look into Marvin's eyes. I listened to Georgean talk about Alabama, and her sister, but when her eyes began to drag I knew it was time for me to leave. I turned to Marvin, drowsy and motionless under a blanket of starch white sheets. Breathing alone took everything out of the frail man, and my eyes stung to see him so lifeless. I wanted to say something, anything, to make him laugh. I tried to think of a memory, idiotic or stupid, that I could rattle off, but as unusual as it is for me, nothing would come to mind. I only thought of Lolita, and three wheeled scooters. I pictured him zooming down Karen Way, his nebulizer in the back basket, and shouting at Georgean to return to him at once. I almost said something, but I couldn't. Grabbing the purse at my feet, I stood up, and walked out of the room.

I still think of Georgean and Marvin daily. I wonder how Marvin's health is going, and I wonder if maybe he isn't even here anymore. I think about Georgean, and hope Nancy knows that a cup of cranberry juice can always lure her back home. I remember the time Georgean, in a moment of clarity, told me about how she met Marvin. It was on his weekend leave during WWII, and at a night bar in San Diego. I imagine a swinging forties band playing in the background, and Georgean, young and beautiful, casually sipping a drink at a table. I can see Marvin, handsome in his navy uniform, approach Georgean. I see them meet, dance, and fall in love all in one night. Vibrant with youthfulness, strong in stature, and a glow in both of their eyes.