

MORE EDGE
A COLLECTION OF MARCHING BAND STORIES

A Project

Presented to the Department of English
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English
(Creative Writing)

by

Teresa Kilang Silvagni

SPRING
2012

©2012

Teresa Kilang Silvagni

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

MORE EDGE
A COLLECTION OF MARCHING BAND STORIES

A Project
by
Teresa Kilang Silvagni

Approved by:

_____, Committee Chair
Dr. Doug Rice

_____, Second Reader
Dr. Joshua McKinney

Date

Student: Teresa Kilang Silvagni

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this project is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the Project.

_____, Graduate Coordinator
Dr. David Toise

Date

Department of English

Abstract
of
MORE EDGE
A COLLECTION OF MARCHING BAND STORIES

by
Teresa Kilang Silvagni

This is a collection of memoirs about experiences in the Trojan Marching Band at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles from 2000 to 2004.

_____, Committee Chair
Dr. Doug Rice

Date

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate my project to my husband Ryan who, despite never having read a word of this memoir, has supported me in a thousand other wonderful ways.

I'd like to thank Dr. Doug Rice and Dr. Joshua McKinney for keeping the creative writing program alive at Sac State and for patiently teaching me how to find my voice.

I'd also like Jessica for being an intimidating person and an amazing friend.

I am forever thankful for Dr. Arthur C. Bartner, not only for not kicking me out of school (which I'm sure he could have if he really wanted to), but for everything he has done and put up with for the sake of band over the years. He is a great and powerful man that I am still terrified of, yet have the utmost respect for.

And finally, I thank my family for helping me with everything, always.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Acknowledgments.....	vi
Chapter	
1. WE ARE S.C.	1
2. BAND BUS ETIQUETTE.....	10
3. JERRY	18
4. DRUNKENNESS LEADS TO DEBAUCHERY	24
5. VOMIT	39
6. HONG KONG DOLLARS	41
7. THE POTENTIAL ENERGY OF A SOUSAPHONE	47
8. THE RUN	49
9. MORE EDGE	55
Works Cited	58

WE ARE S.C.

We wake up. Sore. Is it the third day? Or the fifth day? Perhaps we've been doing this forever. Maybe we won't go. Maybe today will be the day we quit. Turn over. Hit the alarm. Turn off our cell phone so no one can find us. But what time is it? 7 am. We are late. And we must hurry.

We dress. Red shoes, red shirt. Never blue. We grab objects—talismans—that will protect us: water, sunscreen, sunglasses.

Our calves ache. Our shoulders. Our arms. Our feet, our feet. Each step, each foot shatters the sidewalk. Standing on the corner, a bus approaches us. We ponder—and it isn't the first time—jumping in front of it. Perhaps then our absence would be excused.

Late for breakfast and there are no bananas. Where are the bananas? Why don't they ever buy more bananas? We need the potassium and we don't eat any other fruit. Two hundred people, and there are only twenty-five bananas too soon gone. But when more bananas appear we grumble about something else. Why are the eggs cold? Why does this coffee taste burnt? Why isn't there more bottled water? Our pain makes us entitled to unreasonable expectations about the free food. Breakfast burritos again, are you kidding?

There is a commotion when two freshmen try to sit together and not with their sections. Why are you sitting with him? What is she, your girlfriend? We always sit in

sections. “But the older members—“ No! We always sit in sections. Sitting in sections creates unity.

Get some! We rib the shy girl as she sulks back to us. Did you hit that? Is a *Conquest* Lap in order? She shakes her head, keeps her mouth full of a bagel and cream cheese.

It’s almost time.

More talismans appear. Ankle braces. Tape. Sheet music. Sunscreen is applied. Sunglasses go on. Instruments are lifted tenderly from their cases. Touching our mouth to cold metal, warming it.

We hear drums.

A leadership circle gathers first. Chanting. Their energy sets the example. They surround the Old Man and as the drums end, his voice gurgles and wheezes over the field. Occasionally the noise rises to a shout and the entire circle erupts. The freshmen stare, empty-eyed. Their fear is only masked by their exhaustion. They lick their lips and feel each muscle tighten over the day’s potential for suffering.

The drums begin again. It is time.

BEAT the wildcats! BEAT the wildcats! we chant along with the drums. We don’t think about what we’re saying. We said it yesterday, we’ll say it tomorrow. We yell like breathing. We yell like a heartbeat. We can hate them without losing any energy to thinking about that hate. We chant about their defeat until the drums end.

The Old Man greets us, his voice like nails on a chalkboard, like smoking eight packs a day for thirty years, like he’s yelled at us for forty years and not four days. His

anger at us bites through his usual greeting, “Good morning, Band.”

Good morning, Dr. Bartner.

“Are you ready for Ric-Aerobics?”

Oh yay. We shout this bizarre reaction either in true excitement, or with sarcasm.

As long as we’re shouting, it doesn’t matter how we really feel.

Ric Cox: forty-four years old, round, white tennis shoes, black socks, too tight khaki shorts with a sweat-stain where his meaty thighs come together, black fanny pack (who wears those anymore?), red shirt, aviator sunglasses, red hat. He puts a cassette tape (a cassette tape!) into a boom box and “Roll Out the Barrel” echoes its polka bass-line from the 50-yardline of our field to the very edges of campus. He has been in the marching band for twenty-six years.

The Ric-Aerobics have a routine: chants, jokes, arm motions and heckling that go along with the stretches.

Bend me over, Ric!

Put me in Band Grant position!

I love you, Ric!

Ric! It hurts so good!

Some of the noises or statements have been passed down for so long that they don’t make sense anymore. Maybe Ric remembers their origins, but he doesn’t say them.

Whew-whoosh! Goose! Carrot!

But why question where they come from? We will say them. We follow tradition.

The freshmen follow us as best they can. But they do not yet know the code.

They're not one of us. Yet.

Ric Aerobics ends with a SoCal Spellout. The freshmen tongues still stumble at the speed of which they must shout the letters. They say it quietly so no one will hear their awkwardness. But we cheer so loudly, we wouldn't hear them anyway.

This cheer is followed by more chanting. Beat the wildcats. Our energy rises to the moment. Beat the wildcats. There's no more sarcasm in the yells, but true excitement. Beat the wildcats. The Old Man climbs the God Tower.

"Get into lines, Band. Marching down the field in Eights. Call them to attention, Ito! Band: Ten, hut! To the left chair. To the right chair. Band—I think I felt a breeze! A breeze: what is that? This isn't Trojan weather!"

Do you want a water break? No, you fucked up. Run a lap. Run a lap for fucking up. Run a lap because he said your name. Run a lap because he *knows* your name. Run a lap because he mentioned your section.

The sousaphone section, shoulders weighed down with brass, wishes they had chosen to learn piccolo.

On the fourth day of band camp my freshman year, I was in the Los Angeles Times Magazine. It was an article about the Old Man. And us, the band: his empire, his legacy. The photographer caught the tuba freshmen running a lap. I'm thankful the sousaphone bell hides my face. I imagine my face as a cartoon, eyes bulging and tongue lolling out of my mouth. We were halfway around the quarter mile track, halfway to our reward of a water break, each with a right foot behind us as we ran in line, in step. Why

the hell did you freshmen get a picture in a magazine? Take another lap!

We drive it, high-stepping up and down the hundred yards of the field in unison. No one wants to mess up. Messing up involves more laps. Messing up involves people yelling at you instead of with you. Three and a half hours of marching, running and chanting, chanting, chanting. It is time for lunch. Oh yay.

We limp back to the tables, grab our food, and forgo sitting at the tables for sitting on the pavement in the shade. Exhaustion makes every delicious calorie more satisfying. No one complains. We've survived the morning. Drink more; don't get dehydrated! Gallons of lemonade, water, fruit punch drench us. I'm getting more to drink, do you want some? we ask the freshmen. Eyes wide, fearful of a trick, they nod. Instead, we simply bring back two glasses.

Only too soon do we hear the sound of drums. BEAT the wildcats. BEAT the wildcats. Next week we will beat the bears. Beat the farm. Beat the warriors, the ducks and the irish. But who we chant about doesn't matter. What matters is our hatred of them. What matters is the intensity of the chanting. The volume drowns out every other noise. Every sore muscle or injured ego. Every doubt.

The sun seems to have joined us on the field. We sweat. We learn drill now, no more basics. This is your spot, freshman! Two off the forty-five six up from the hash how hard can that be? We're exhausted. We yell. We yell at each other. We yell up at the Old Man who can't hear us from his God Tower.

But he doesn't need to hear the obscenities we hurl at him. He has his own anger to throw back.

"That guy! That guy right there out of step! He's not in the right spot! He's not driving it. Everyone here is driving it except for him."

Who? Who? Holy shit, kick him out!

"The saxophone!"

T.A.s converge upon the saxophone section. Who? Who? Which one?

"That guy in the red shirt!"

Seven male members of the section step out to take a lap.

"Eghh! What are you doing? You're messing up our form!"

Seven male members of the section drop down to do push-ups.

The guy in the red shirt, ha! The guy with the skin, we joke. The guy with the eyes. The guy holding an instrument.

He doesn't know us and there's no way to differentiate us from where he stands. He was actually referring to a particularly cute blond freshman girl named Promise.

"You're beginning to lose focus, band. I think you need a Torture Drill!"

Oh yay. We scream. Freshmen shudder. Just try to follow along is the advice we give them. And keep in step! The Old Man counts us off, and, marching in place, each band member plays a song. We all play different songs at the same time, each individual trying to be louder than his neighbors, trying to break his instrument's sound over the rest of the band. The noise is voluminous. The freshmen are desperate. Why and how should this cacophony motivate us to focus? Why should it encourage us to do more?

“Exssssellent, Band. I love it.”

We laugh as the torture drill ends. The drums begin again for another chant. We are (tap tap) S.C.! (you’re not!) We are (tap tap) S.C.! (you’re not!)

Two more hours until dinner.

On the fifth day of band camp my freshman year, I finally found myself alone with the section leader in the back room of the band office. I would have done this sooner if I had I not been so terrified of her (and everyone else in the section). “Jessica,” I said, “I’ve been thinking about it, and... I think I’m going to quit.” “What?” Her jaw dropped. Her voice was hoarse from yelling at me on the field. “Why?” “Well... I’ve been thinking about it and I’m not really getting this style of marching... The music’s been really difficult for me... Especially the memorization... And the band’s great and all it’s just, well... It’s not what I thought it would be...” She was shaking her head even before I stopped talking... “No, Teresa. No. You can’t quit. You can’t.” Her voice shook with an emotion I couldn’t quite place. “Just get through this week. Band Camp sucks. Hell, I wouldn’t be in band if the whole fucking year was like band camp. Band isn’t like this. This is just Band Camp. No one likes Band Camp. Stay two weeks. Wait until gameday. Do some gigs. Stay a month. Just wait it out. You’re going to love it. You need to stay.”

After dinner, we have one hour of sectionals. People relax for the first time all day. We joke. We don’t yell. We learn the freshmen’s names for the first or fifth time. We

practice breathing exercises, we tune, we sight-read new music. We stress the importance of how much there is to memorize. You should really do that tonight, after you get home. No, you can't bring your horn with you, but just bring the music home and learn the fingering.

And then, at the end of the evening, the group comes together to play.

The only indoor venue on campus large enough for all of us to gather is the stage of an empty theater. The stagelights are bright, but not nearly as warm as our sunburned skin. Blackness fills the seats stretched out in front of us. We play for no audience but ourselves.

Dr. Bartner, our director, raises his arms.

The music of two hundred people is a thing of beauty.

It's already been a fourteen-hour day. We've already been playing for three hours. But before we're dismissed we must always play the same song one last time.

"Conquest," he calls. Everyone stands.

It begins with a low tone, the low C, played by the tubas. Trumpets come in and the mellophones answer. Then a unison line with breaths of silence in-between each note. The melody begins, our sound marching forward, filling the empty space. The pyramid of sound—low tones on the bottom, building up towards the high sounds on top—bringing our music closer to the divine. It grows into an anthem. Others have played this song before us and others will play it after us and this will be our connection. We come to the song's bridge and cross it triumphantly. Chords fall and rise, fall and rise. And the last two measures crescendo until the sound fills the vacant theater with the

roar of the sublime. No one person could make this music. It is only together that we are glorious.

“Band, dismissed.”

BAND BUS ETIQUETTE

It was a joke. It was funny.

Joke 1

Question: What's the difference between a professional musician and a large, pepperoni pizza?

Answer: A pizza can feed a family of four.

I wasn't prepared. I didn't know we were supposed to tell jokes on the bus. Maybe I had heard about it. Had I? But when it was my turn, somehow the only joke I remembered from my previous, non-TMB life insulted the future profession of many older band members.

Get in the Head, freshman!

I enjoyed my periods of confinement in the bus bathroom. It was cozy. Sure, the gray, plastic walls, the mysteriously wet metal floor combined with the inability to properly light an area the size of an upright coffin made me wonder if it were truly designed as a prison... but it was quiet. Unless, of course, I felt the need to talk, which most of the time I did because, let's face it, it was difficult *not* to introduce myself to the six other freshmen shoved into the head with me.

After that first joke, and after we burst out of the moist bathroom back into the strident cabin of the bus, I noticed JimBob still sat in his seat.

"Why didn't you get thrown in the Head?" I whispered. But Jessica heard me.

"This guy knew a good joke," she smiled (she only smiles when she's drunk) and

hit him on the back. He winced.

When I later asked JimBob what “good” joke he had told, his answer explained what I needed to know. JimBob’s older brother, Dr. Spankenstein was in the band. JimBob had been prepared. And even though I didn’t necessarily dislike getting shoved into the Head all that much (at least no older members could harass you in there), it was Jessica’s drunken smile of approval that had won me over.

Before our 8-hour bus ride for the Weekender trip, I sat in USC’s computer lab and googled:

racist jokes

obscene jokes

sexist jokes.

Joke 2

Question: Why are there no blond Mexicans?

Answer: How dumb do you want those people to be?

Like everything else in the Trojan Marching Band, there is a routine for how you do things: a tradition.

It begins when the older members finish their first or fifth beer. They’re bored.

They begin chanting:

Freshmen on the mic! Freshmen on the mic!

They look for volunteers. There usually aren’t any. Being first on the mic could mean a longer time in the Head. And so they find someone they don’t know (she looks

like a freshman!) and point and chant her to the front of the bus.

When you get to the mic you need to tap it and ask, “Is this thing on?” They expected this, but scream and yell at you anyway. They might throw something, but nothing hard. My advice is to take this in stride. The slapstick of having a balled-up itinerary hit you in the face (two hundred copies handed out by Jessica earlier, all containing the typo “Red Shit Gig” instead of “Red Shirt”) is better than being not funny at all. No one sympathizes with your embarrassment when your embarrassment is just so fucking funny. When they are finished, you introduce yourself.

“Hello, my name is Teresa.”

No! Tell us your real name...

Your “real” name is not the name your parents gave you. It’s your band nickname.

“Hello, my name is Tit.”

Why?

“Because one’s real and the other’s fake.”

Who cares for the true answer as long as they’re entertained? They groan and laugh. Show me! some shout. They love it. You’re allowed to continue with the show, which is all you can hope to ask for.

Groans and laughter (with booing only from some Mexicans on the bus) mean that the joke went over well. Maybe some repeat it to each other and laugh again. My brownness makes some people think I’m Mexican, which makes them laugh harder. Self-deprecation of any kind makes a joke funnier.

They cheer and I go sit in the back of the bus next to JimBob (his real name; because he's more racist than a Southern Denny's).

Joke 3

Question: Why do Jews wear yarmulkes?

Answer: So you don't burn your hands when you push them into the oven.

You think you know what's offensive. You've previously only heard about anti-Semitic jokes in World War II history and you've never actually heard one in person. A joke is only a pattern, a combination of words that creates meaning, an idea, an idea you think you're against but when it comes down to it you find yourself laughing at it like the rest of them because these are the people you want to belong to.

"You can laugh, you know," Jessica said. "It was a joke. It was funny."

I remember how Mike Fleishman's eyes glistened after he told it. "It's ok, I'm Jewish," he said.

Joke 4

Question: Why can't Helen Keller drive?

Answer: Because she's a woman.

There were not only jokes on the busrides, but songs as well. Our favorite type was the "anti-fight song." New lyrics were sung to tunes of other schools' fight songs. These lyrics managed to question their men's virility, sexuality, and ability to drink as

much as us or play as loud as us while also depicting their women as disease-ridden sluts. It was like taking one of their school emblems away from them. Even if our Team lost (which rarely happened) we could still go back to the bus with a smile, hearing the other school's band play a fight song, the dirty lyrics drunkenly twirling through our heads.

These songs, along with others, were collectively called *The Hymenal*. *The Hymenal* used to be a publication passed out to freshmen sometime before the Weekender trip, but had now been suppressed into an online document freshmen had to seek out for themselves in order to keep from the embarrassment of not knowing the lyrics when they were needed. It was yet another required item of memorization along with chants, stand charts, halftime show music, traditions and history too vague and mythologized to keep track of, which kept all freshmen in a dizzying state of uncertainty.

What was the punishment for not knowing *The Hymenal's* contents? I have no idea. Because who was ever brave enough to find out?

I can still sing most of them from memory. My favorite bus song is below to the tune of "Red River Valley." On the right is the counter melody. Band kids love their counter melodies.

Men

Won't you sit on my face if you love me?

(We don't love you!)

Won't you sit on my face if you care?

(We don't care!)

Let me eat out our red river valley?

(No way!)

Let me tangle my teeth in your hair?

(In your wet dreams!)

Women

Won't you whip out your dick if you love me?

(We love you!)

Let me suck on your cock if you care?

(We care!)

Let me lick up and down your erection?

(Oh yeah!)

I won't stop, 'til you cum, everywhere!

(In your hair!)

This is one of the less-offensive songs. The anti-fight songs are much more offensive.

Joke 5

Question: Why didn't Superman save the Twin Towers from the terrorists?

Answer: Because he's a paraplegic.

"Oh, shit." Someone said.

“Dude, Spank. Too soon...” Somebody else said. It was less than two weeks after 9/11.

A couple people still laughed. And, surprising myself, I laughed with them. I had expected one thing from the joke but got another.

“Aw, come on, guys. That’s fucking funny. It’s making fun of Christopher Reeve, not the Twin Towers...”

Joke 6

Question: What do you get when you stab a baby with an Ice Pick?

Answer: An erection.

Joke 7

Question: How many dead babies does it take to fill a bathtub?

Answer: 57.

Joke 8

Question: Two fags were fucking a dead alligator when God walks in...

What, you don’t get it? You want a punchline? Fine. God walks in and says, “Holy shit. These guys are fucking a dead alligator.”

There’s nothing to get. The more offensive a joke can be, the more uncomfortable you can make people feel (educated people who wrote about Dr. King in

their college admission essays), the funnier it is. You do everything to push comfort levels away because the further you push them, the closer you are to the center of the group's core. Deviance is conformity. You can resist getting shoved into the Head as a freshman, complain that it's uncomfortable, write a letter to the University about hazing, or you can put your arm around a stranger and ask them, "What's your name? What instrument do you play" and shout outside, "There's only six of us... I think we could fit a couple more."

"I don't hate Jews," Jessica insists. "I hate people. I hate everyone but us."

JERRY

It is difficult to write a story about Jerry without explaining another story first a different story that began before him, but that—at the time—I was doing everything to try to ignore, to try to escape from. So I will tell Jerry’s story without telling that story, but only because I didn’t want the two to be connected.

Jerry is a name I can never take seriously. When I first heard it, the only association I had with it was the cartoon: Tom and Jerry. Although I don’t really remember that cartoon well enough to know whether Jerry was the cat or the mouse.

Jerry arrived my freshman year at band camp in Oxnard a day late, driving up in a blue Mustang convertible with the other TA, Bob. They drove the car straight into our sectional, nudging Jessica’s calves with the front of the car when she turned her back on them. “Those fuckers. Ignore them,” she ordered, looking warily at how Jerry stared at me.

One night in the fall, Jessica asked for volunteers to play at a Volleyball game after rehearsal. The 30-piece band needed a second tuba player because Jerry was the only person signed up for it. “I’ll do it if you need me, I guess...” I said when no one else spoke up.

“Stay away from my freshman,” Jessica later said to him when she thought I

couldn't hear her.

"What?" he asked, as though he were innocent.

"I remember the first time I saw you, at Band Camp," he once told me. "I was excited we actually had a beautiful girl in the section. I was looking for excuses to touch you. Do you remember?"

I didn't have many happy memories from that freshman year Band Camp. I only remembered aching. But I remember him coming up to me, his shades covering his eyes, and squeezing my shoulder. "Are you all right?" he asked me. "You look like you're about to cry..."

"I'm fine," I answered. And he moved on.

The first time we were together was in some music department professor's office. Jerry fell asleep on the couch afterwards. I played on the piano in the room, songs I remembered from my childhood. I didn't realize I had woken him until he said, "You're not that bad. Maybe sometime we can go over to the Alfred Newman Recital Hall and you can play on the \$50,000 piano." "All right," I said. We had sex there too. This time, on stage. Jerry had a campus job with the title of Concert Master, which gave him the privilege of having too many keys for too many of the campus buildings. By the end of my freshman year, I'd had sex in more buildings than I had classes in.

We tried to keep it a secret. We'd arrive at the Band Office separately, even if we

had just been together. We didn't sit together on bus rides. At rehearsals and sectionals, I did not speak to him unless spoken to. But Jessica was suspicious. Bob as well. I began telling people I was a lesbian, and then no one knew what to think. I didn't care if people thought I was gay. I was eighteen and, at thirty-two, Jerry was fourteen years my senior. Being gay sounded better than being a slut. I didn't want to think I was a slut.

"I know why you don't like doing that," he said one night in the car when I had yet again refused a certain sexual request of his.

"What do you know?" I said.

"You feel like you're choking. That's why. I know; I've done it before."

I closed my eyes to the confusing darkness.

"I was abused when I was younger," he said. "My uncle abused me. Well... and my aunt and my mother... But it was different with them, you know? My uncle was a jerk. He held my head down, and I would feel like I was choking. And he would tell me afterwards that if I ever told anyone, they would think I was gay, they would think I was a liar. I look at you sometimes, and I think maybe something like that might have happened to you too. I see it in your eyes. Am I right?"

"Not exactly," I said.

"Maybe we shouldn't be doing this," he said.

But we never stopped.

One day, working on a paper on the Band Office computers, I received an instant

message from a screenname I didn't recognize.

JL3brats: hey, sry you were disappointed to find out about jerry.

trojantooba: what? who is this?

JL3brats: sorry you were disappointed.

this is jerry's wife.

I made some excuse about going to class and signed off before she could write anything else. It was easy enough to figure out what happened: she had seen some email, IM or phone call from me and he had covered his lies with a new lie about a college girl who was obsessed with him. Jerry had lied to me. I was "disappointed" that I had been tricked, devastated that he had chosen to trick me, but somehow the information that he was married did not surprise me. The secrecy of our relationship had not been for me. Deep down, I must have known that his "ex-wife" was not really an *ex* and the reason we never went to his place was not "because of the kids." And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that it didn't change anything. I was mad at him for lying, but part of me didn't want to lose what I thought we had. I wanted to hold on to the understanding he had once offered me.

"Take care of it," I told him when I spoke to him only a couple days later. "I don't want her talking to me again.

"OK," he said, surprised.

Jerry became a drug I couldn't escape from. A wound I kept reopening. We would have blow-ups and hook-ups. Sometimes I wouldn't see him other than Band for

months at a time. But whenever the loneliness became unbearable, I would find myself calling him again. He could be both the answer and the cause of feeling unlovable.

“I don’t think we should be doing this,” he often said when he picked me up. “It seems to make you unhappy.”

“But I’m happy when I’m with you,” I’d tell him as we drove to some dirty motel in some corner of Los Angeles.

One night we checked into a place off Jefferson after a basketball game. We weren’t even in the room before I was on him. He responded quickly to my excitement.

“God, you’ve been wanting this all night, haven’t you?”

“Mm...” I replied, my mouth too busy for words. Jerry liked to talk the whole time. It wasn’t my favorite thing, but I put up with it because he seemed to enjoy it.

“I want to ask you something,” he said, “but I don’t want you to be mad.”

“OK.”

“Promise me you won’t get mad,” he said.

“What?”

“You’ve got to promise.”

“God, just ask me,” I told him, anxious to get on with it.

He waited. It seemed for a moment that he changed his mind, then suddenly he asked: “Did you like it this much when your teacher forced you to do this?”

I tensed; hoping to pull through the overwhelming stretch between what I was doing and where my mind was going, hoping I could just ignore what he said and

continue, act normal, like those words didn't affect me, but the tension in the line tying the past and the present only needed a touch to snap, as I fell to the mattress, sobbing. ("But I asked you," he said, "You said you wouldn't get mad." "I didn't think that was the question you were going to ask," I said.) We left the hotel room an hour later without spending the night.

"They're not related," I told my therapist once. "Jerry and the teacher... It's not the same thing."

"And why do you say that?" she asked me with a tone that carried the practiced sound of artificial neutrality.

"Because Jerry didn't hurt me. Or, at least, any hurt he caused me hurt him too. He was lying to me and he was hurting me but he understood it. He understood me. And so I let him. Because I understood him too. I wanted that kind of hurt."

DRUNKENNESS LEADS TO DEBAUCHERY

From the USC Catholic Center website:

In 1993 Father William Messenger was installed as pastor by Cardinal Roger Mahony, replacing the Servite Fathers that had shepherded the parish for a number of years. The Center has grown dramatically in student involvement and programming opportunities over the last decade. Perhaps most importantly, the USC Catholic Center serves as a central gathering place where USC students form spiritual, social, cultural, and intellectual connections. Such gathering places are a crucial factor in student retention and graduation — a defining point in the way alumni identify with their alma mater. All students are invited to use the center as a meeting place where, before or after classes, they can catch up on studies or make new friends. By fostering informal social interaction the USC Catholic Center helps students avert potential feelings of isolation, fosters lifelong connections, and provides a physical home away from home for experiences that deepen the lessons learned in classrooms, laboratories, and lecture halls. (“Catholic Center History.”)

WORSHIP

A halo of wavy hair, eyes the color of the horizon and skin so white that next to my dirt-colored flesh he'd always be more pure.

The halo blinded me to him until my sophomore year, moving into my new off-campus apartment—uncomfortably far off-campus when, for a USC student, letting yourself wander so far from your protected space is dangerous—I saw him moving into the apartment building next door. He had shaved his head as bald as a baby and was hardly recognizable had he not been wearing a Red Shirt. He greeted me first.

“You look like a Neo-Nazi,” I told him.

“I know,” he said, pulling his palm over the desert of skin. “That’s what my girlfriend—“ and here he paused, but went on to continue, “That’s what people keep telling me.” We walked to Band Camp together the next morning and to- and from-campus every day after.

Luke was co-section leader that year with another senior, Sergio. Based on the reign of their predecessor, Jessica, I should have been terrified of them. But they hated each other and yelled at each other more often than at the rest of us. I suppose I had not noticed Luke my freshman year because my focus had only been on potential threats. Now I found myself in the unfamiliar position of being on platonically friendly, if not equal, terms with someone in charge. It exhilarated me and I didn't want to spoil it. For the first few weeks I let him do most of the talking, asking questions to learn the details of what I thought one friend should know about another.

Luke was a senior in band and at USC. Twenty-one years old. A vocal major. Liked video games. Loved Kevin Smith movies. Engaged to a girl, Therese, he'd been dating for seven years. She hated Kevin Smith movies. Wedding date planned for next August.

One night I worked up the courage to ask him about the thing about him I did remember from the previous year.

"So why don't you drink?" It was a conspicuous peculiarity in the Marching Band. A sin against our society. I wasn't even sure how he'd ever been allowed to get away with it.

"Because. I believe that drunkenness leads to debauchery."

He left it at that and I stared at him wondering if the sentence was a joke or a punchline. But his eyes (oh his sky-blue eyes) reflected nothing but seriousness. I imagined the line "Drunkenness Leads to Debauchery" on a banner hanging inside of his ultra-conservative Christian church in his hometown.

“Yeah. I guess that’s about right,” I admitted.

CHURCH

Jay showed up at the Band Office while I was working and asked if I were going to the ecumenical Ash Wednesday service—special this year because three Los Angeles bishops (Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran) would attend.

“Shit, I almost forgot.”

“Yeah, I would have too but Bill reminded me last night.”

Although I passed the USC Catholic Center daily on my walks to and from campus, I wasn’t as faithful a devotee as Jay. I tried to attend weekly mass but often failed on Sunday mornings after our eighteen-hour gamedays. Jay not only played flute in the marching band but in the church choir, and he hung out with Father Bill so often that I’d never heard him actually use the priest’s title when saying his name.

“I don’t know if I can go. I have a class.”

“Ditch class. It’s church.”

My poor church attendance might not have had only to do with my penchant for sleeping in (in fact, to counter such excuses the USC Catholic Center had 7pm and 11pm masses for the late crowd). If I were honest with myself, I’d admit it was my errant college lifestyle made me confused as to my place at church and in my religion.

But Ash Wednesday is a time for repentant sinners. And I didn’t need much convincing for attending the service; it was one of my favorite events at USC. Students, faculty and university staff all gathered in Bovard Auditorium in the middle of the day to

celebrate the beginning of Lent. I liked the diversity of the people there, and the presence of more than just my own religion. It felt nice that the religions could celebrate what they shared in common instead of rail against their differences for once. Jay and I walked over to the auditorium together.

“So what do you and Father Bill do when you hang out, Jay?”

He shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Whatever you’d do with your friends when you hang out—not band people... normal friends...”

“Well, like, what are his interests and hobbies then?”

We were only steps away from Bovard before he answered. “Bill likes to cook... He enjoys eating exotic meats.”

“He... wait, what?” I stopped in the needle’s eye of the door to give Jay the look. But he pushed me forward with a groan.

“Not like that, Teresa. God, you’re being nasty. Like, *actual* exotic meat. We’ve had buffalo, ostrich, rattlesnake, alligator...” His voice trailed off as I imagined skinned animals parading two by two across Father Bill’s oaken dining table and into his and Jay’s opened mouths.

The auditorium was already so full when we got there we could only find separate seating. With no one to talk to before the service began, I found myself eavesdropping on the Lutheran conversation next to me... “If Father Bill wears that lavender, fish-patterned vestment again around all these bishops here today, I’m going to die. I mean, seriously, how do the Catholics let him get away with all that stuff he does? *I’m* more Catholic than Father Bill!”

FAITH

Since Fat Bastard was the only Junior in the tuba section, both Luke, a senior, and I, a sophomore, filled the rest of the tuba spots for the Junior Trip to Arizona. The Marching Band stayed at Embassy Suites, as usual; the band's hotel of choice because of their free happy hour from 6 to 9 pm.

Most of the juniors were either old enough or had fake IDs, and Luke and I, nondrinkers by choice or legality, grew bored. He suggested we go on a walk and find a place to eat. I agreed because I went along with most of his decisions anyway.

I don't remember how or why it came up as we wandered through the desert, but I remember the statement, like an accusation:

"Oh yeah, you're a Catholic, huh?"

"Yeah." I knew he didn't approve of this part of me, but it was something I couldn't deny.

"You know what's always bothered me about Catholics?" I shrugged and he went on without waiting for an answer. "Saints. And the Virgin Mary. You guys idolize her and them. When you're supposed to be worshipping Jesus."

"That's not very original, you know."

"What?"

"That's what all freaking-Christians say about Catholics. That religious argument's been done before."

The lights we'd been walking toward turned out to be a residence, not a restaurant.

We saw another set of lights farther off and turned in that direction.

The wind shifted, blowing sand and trash toward us as we walked along the embankment. He shrugged his hands into his sweatshirt's pockets and subconsciously walked closer to me for warmth.

"So why then?"

"What?"

"Why Mary and the saints? What's their purpose?"

"Well... I don't know what the official reason is..." I regretted this admission as soon as it cleared my tongue. It was another judgment of Christians for Catholics, that we didn't know our faith closely enough. "But I've always thought of it like role models. People whose faith you should aspire to. Real people who had to deal with real life but still knew what they believed."

"Jesus was a real person."

"Jesus was born human, but he was still God. I don't feel like it would be much of a struggle to believe in God if you were born having his powers to make miracles..."

"And besides," I added after a pause, "the Catholics need Mary around since we don't allow chicks do *anything* else. If it weren't for her we'd just be *totally* gay." He laughed like I wanted him to and it lightened the mood some.

We reached the other set of lights we were following, but they too turned into another creepy house in the desert, another mirage in our search for sustenance. It was cold. We walked for a couple hours before we finally found a 7-11. It was not the destination we desired, but we bought some snacks and decided to have a cab drive us

back to the hotel.

The cabbie admonished us: “You kids walk out here alone, eh? Fuck man, it’s a bad part of the desert. Two people shot last week. Don’t do it again.”

CHURCH

Therese thought Luke was a bad Christian for being a member of the Trojan Marching Band. I disagreed with her about him. He was in the TMB but out of it, separate in a way I was never able—and wasn’t sure I wanted—to accomplish. I knew I was a bad Catholic in the TMB. But the TMB was full of bad Catholics, bad Episcopalians, bad Lutherans, bad Baptists, bad Mormons... Bad at our religion, but good at the faith that someone would eventually forgive us for it.

WORSHIP

On the way back from Arizona we sat next to each other in the back of the bus. It was late and dark. Some people were trying to get classwork done, reading in the dim overhead lighting, but I planned on simply trying to get sleep. I produced a pillow out of my band bag. Luke gaped.

“You didn’t have that on the way over.”

“Um... no. I may have taken it from the hotel room.”

I fluffed it a little, set it on his shoulder and looked up at him.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

“Quite.”

“Yeah, it should be. It was worth your soul.”

I closed my eyes and felt the warmth—his warmth—penetrate through the cotton and down. It was worth it.

CHURCH

Different excerpts of words as written on the billboard at the USC Catholic Center:

USCatholic

jesUS Christ

Jesus Loves U. (S.C.)

WORSHIP

Band rehearsal gave us the same schedule, and Luke was whom I started, ended and spent most of my day with. If there were—God forbid—days when there was no band rehearsal, we’d venture out into Los Angeles together, going out to dinner or to some movie he’d choose.

One night after band rehearsal, while walking away I heard Fat Bastard comment to Jessica, “If Teresa hadn’t told us she’s a lesbian, I’d think she and Luke were up to something.”

“What do you mean?”

“They act like they’re together...”

I resisted the temptation to think like that. I convinced myself that yes, I may have a crush on him, but unrequited love was the safest thing for me at that moment. This is

what I told myself.

But then there was the night that on the way home he turned to me and said, “Let’s buy some alcohol and get drunk.” I could only agree.

We stopped by 32nd Street Market—more commonly referred to as “Ghetto Mart”—and I filled a cart with my favorites. Then I left to pick out mixers while he paid. I was still only 19. He was letting me play the expert at alcohol. And maybe I was a kind of expert because I had known enough to realize that something bad enough to make him want to break his self-imposed restriction on alcohol and drink would be better discussed after we’d broken into the booze.

“I broke up with Therese,” he told me.

I didn’t realize how much I was praying for it until I heard the words burst forth from his mouth like a miracle. His fiancé, the one who shared my name but the one I listened to him complain about for the entirety of our friendship, vanished like a plague. If he had been able to hear himself on our busrides, our nightly walks, our weekend excursions, he would not have been as surprised at their breakup as he sounded now while describing it. I was ordering myself to be kind, that if I were a real friend I wouldn’t be celebrating a friend’s breakup... But my next sip of booze tasted like nectar.

I unleashed the clichés. It wasn’t meant to be. It’s better it happened now than after you got married. You’re too good for her. I never liked her anyways. You’ll find somebody else. And through all the comfort I was thinking me, choose me, God, please choose me! When he was done lamenting, and I was done being a good friend, we lapsed into silence.

Lightheaded with alcohol, we watched TV in his living room. MTV's list of top 40 banned videos. The Dr. Bartner Show on the USC station. Strange independent art films on the IFC channel. Bollywood videos with their bright colors, eye flirtations and duets that span fields and forests.

At some point I noticed our bare feet were touching. His right, my left. Heat filled me. I wondered how to corrupt him. How to convince him to abandon his previously known life for me.

We next touched hands. Palm to palm. My unworthy hand against his, smooth and saintlike.

Finally our lips prayed together, formless words breathing into each other's bodies. I wanted to bite his lip, to grind against him, to suck and fuck him, to have him inside of me in every place possible. Instead, his lips merely trembled against mine.

I opened my mouth more than he did, trying to put my tongue inside of him. This was the beginning of the end. I would have held off if I'd known that ahead of time. But soon after, he pulled away.

In rapture I looked at him. I would have done anything he asked me. Instead, he looked at me for guidance. "What now?" he asked.

With no prelude, I burst into tears. They began as happiness. Thankfulness for him having chosen me. But the more he kept asking me "What's wrong?" the less I was able to answer, the less I knew. The tears fell fervently, like drops of blood on the ground. I simply couldn't express how much I wanted him. How much I believed in him. Instead I confessed: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

CHURCH

Out of the four gospels of the Bible, Saint Luke's gospel is the one that shows the greatest compassion for sinners. Luke wanted God's kingdom opened up for all and saw hope for God's mercy for everyone.

FAITH

Jay had been asking me for a long time, but I finally conceded to go to a Thursday night Catholic Center party. This particular evening was a Wine and Cheese night, and the number of people attending surprised me. It was loud: a real party. Wine was consumed. Bread and crackers were broken. My shyness made me hide from Father Bill's rosy cheeks, though I was curious to see what the drunken priest was like when not preaching. At around 2 am the karaoke machine came out. Not brave enough for a solo on the microphone, I belted out the lyrics I recognized leaning against the wall in the back of a room with a girl I just met. Jay had vanished, but after a while I was already too far gone to care. The loudest cheers filled the room when Father Bill took the mic.

"You're just too good to be true,

Can't take my eyes off of you.

You'd be like heaven to touch;

I want to hold you so much.

At long last love has arrived,

And I thank God I'm alive!

You're just too good to be true,

Can't take my eyes off of you..."

He had a beautiful voice. But I wondered about his choice in songs. Who's behind the lyrics of a priest's love song?

WORSHIP

Luke had not returned my calls all day but I knew he had told Sergio he'd be playing at the Songfest gig that night. I wanted to do the gig with him. Maybe hold his hand. I wanted to show people we were together. Luke was my salvation from my disastrous relationships with men. He was around my age. He was someone I could introduce my parents to. He was someone I didn't have to keep secret anymore. We spent all our time together anyway; the only way our relationship would change would be in the affirmation that what we did together wasn't shameful.

Luke was already in the tuba cave when I got there, sitting in the only chair the room had to offer (a scratchy molting ottoman someone must have stolen from another building on campus) in the center of the gleaming instruments. He greeted me but didn't look up when I came in. I craved closeness with him, so I sat on the floor by his feet. This position only made it easier for him to crush me.

"So... I talked to Therese today."

"Oh really?" My vision turning black. My face burning. Screaming off in the distance.

"Yeah. I think she and I are going to try and work it out."

Of course. His heavenly blue eyes were watching me. He expected some kind of scene. He watched for the trickle of insanity from the jilted woman that wanted to destroy his chosen path, his safe life. Just a little leak from the crack that would make the dam burst. The thrashing waters of my agony were there, but contained behind a sturdy wall of disillusionment and calm self-hatred.

“Wow. Good for you guys.”

I played the gig anyway. We didn’t speak when we walked home together that night. I got drunk in my apartment alone.

FAITH

Once, while browsing an internet support group for self-injurers, a fellow Catholic questioned whether or not the act of self-injury was a sin—mutilation of a body created in God’s image, similar to how suicide is a sin in Catholicism.

But if I sin when I bleed, don’t I redeem myself by healing? See how tenderly I wash my wounds. Watch how gently I rub the ointment. See how carefully I wrap the bandages that will conceal everything. I am both a sinner and a savior.

FAITH

After my senior year, I heard from Jay what had happened at the Catholic Center.

Someone had anonymously reported that they had seen “inappropriate physical conduct” between Father Bill and a USC student at one of the Thursday night gatherings. Someone reported that he was seen making-out with a student.

The Church and the University conducted separate investigations into the incident. The Church found nothing. No one, even the original anonymous accuser, confessed to anything happening at that event. However, the University, in its investigation, was scandalized at the amount of alcohol consumption on a weekly basis at Catholic Center events under Father Bill's charge. The parties had never been secret, but the University had never needed to know about their activities. USC demanded his removal, and since Father Bill's rebellious antics had probably never been popular with Holy Mother Church, he either resigned from the priesthood or was defrocked. I was never quite certain.

What is a priest like when he's no longer a priest? Does he still do daily Mass? Does he still go to church? Does he believe in God?

I could have asked Jay. The last I heard, Bill was "crashing" on Jay's couch. But I never asked Jay about him. Because I feared the answer.

WORSHIP

I think we both thought something would change: that we'd have a different relationship after what happened. Certainly I was different—I began cutting again, I began fucking Jerry again—but I kept these changes concealed from Luke. Luke thought that everything else was as it was before, as if that one night could be wiped clean from his immaculate life.

But I still was over at Luke's every night. He still complained about his girlfriend to me. We still went out together a few times a month, supposedly in the name of

friendship. I accepted the simulacrum of the boyfriend/girlfriend relationship because it was so close to the real thing. It was everything I wanted except the name and the sex.

And I barraged our friendship with alcohol in hopes that what had happened before would happen again. Because virtue untested is no virtue at all.

It was not until Valentine's Day that I again found myself kissing someone else's boyfriend. We were so drunk from wine he had brought home from a gala at the university library he worked at. It progressed and I went down on the floor in front of him. "No," he gasped, shocked, virginal. "Please. Just let me," I begged him. I thought maybe if I could show him a different world he'd choose this different path and choose me instead. I didn't care that I was the temptress, that I was trying to pull him away with sin. He wanted the temptation. I wanted him to be there with me. I wanted him in my world. I wanted him with me. I wasn't what he wanted but I still didn't care. I worshipped him on my knees.

VOMIT

I had promised myself I wouldn't drink this much at Disneyland again, but we were so hungry after the parade where I had seen a girl on the side of Main Street wearing a sweatshirt from my high school band review, and I had been so excited that I stopped playing and ran over to the curb, grabbing her, scaring her, telling her we went to the same high school, and I tried to find her afterward but it was too late and my college friends were making me go to ESPN Zone, where they were as slow as Disneyland lines in serving us food, but they were quick like the break we had in pouring us beer, beer, beer and it made me think of the last time I was at Disneyland and Jerry was pouring Tequila shots—Jose Cuervo Silver—down my throat until I could barely walk around the park, let alone spin on the teacups, and I barely made it back to the bus before puking up the beignets I had eaten for dinner, the sugar-sweet donuts making up the best vomit I'd ever tasted and the bus left without the girl horn-player named Stitch because she breaks things, which is funny because "*Ohana* means family and family means no one gets left behind, or forgotten," but somehow we are back at campus and JimBob and I leave without even helping to unload the tubas, getting into his car because we're too drunk to walk the five blocks to the house we're staying at, JimBob stopping at the store to buy water and bread because that's what Jessica's taught us to have when you're drunk and you still need to make it to rehearsal in a few hours, and he hands me water in a paper cup, which I hold but can't bring myself to drink, and when I do, it's a good thing we're parked already because I throw open the door and empty my stomach contents into the

gutter, which although I'm certain this college neighborhood gutter has seen plenty of puke before, I'm still ashamed of because it's the first time I've not made it to the toilet to throw up since I was seven and threw up a bologna and Wonderbread sandwich under the swing set, and my shame is amplified by Carlos and Corinna, two freshmen driving up in their car behind us asking if I'm ok so I choke out "I'm fine-" and "Awesome-" between gags and gasps, and everyone laughs until I fall onto the ground in front of the house, holding onto the grass so I don't fall off the edge of the universe, and JimBob gets me inside the house by telling me there's bread inside (although it's not really inside yet since he's holding it in his hand) and he cares for me and feeds me this Wonderbread and water which doesn't fill me, doesn't settle my stomach, doesn't make me better until I must run to the toilet with the bread coming up my throat, not at all digested but coming up in mushy clumps that I gag out wishing myself back, wishing I wouldn't drink at Disneyland, wishing that everything wasn't turned to shit, shit, shit.

HONG KONG DOLLARS

Lifelong. Worldwide.

(the motto of the USC Alumni Association)

Johnny Wong stood nearly a foot shorter than me, but his giant white cowboy hat and cowboy boots made up some of the difference in height. Several blue-hairs fawned over him, but his speaking voice was clearly loud enough for the Songgirls near me to hear.

“You see that building over there? I buy that building: *seven millrion dollrars*. I sell that building: *fifteen millrion dollrars*. That building make me a lots of money.” He threw his head back in what I can only describe as maniacal laughter. The Songgirls continued drinking their white wine.

“Hey. Got you another beer.” I looked up half a second too late, based on the assumption that whoever was speaking wasn’t speaking to me.

“Oh. Thanks, Brett.”

“What’s new?”

“Oh, same old, same old... Drinking on a yacht with a crazy billionaire.” Brett smiled at me. I looked down at my bottle of mysterious Asian-brand beer and wondered why I had chosen it opposed to the Bud and Millers that Johnny Wong had also stocked the bar with for us on our cruise around Hong Kong’s harbor. I wondered if my joke was true for Brett: this could be something he was used to. I had only been to his house once, but he referred to it as “the compound” in casual conversation and it took up an entire

city block. Unlike me, Brett had no financial aid supplementing the \$40,000 a year tuition.

“Going out tonight?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Don’t think so. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Tonight! How many times are you going to be in Hong Kong?”

I shrugged. I ripped around the characters on the beer label. Hong Kong ATMs still take your American ATM card. The computer does the exchange rate for you and spits out Hong Kong dollars. It’s up to you to figure out if, during the exchange, your bank account is overdrawn yet.

“I can’t really afford it.” *I don’t really fit in here*, I thought. *Not with Brett, not with Johnny Wong, not with anyone at my school. I’m trying to but I don’t. I can’t. What I’m doing is false.* US and Hong Kong money are both called dollars but they’re worth completely different amounts.

Brett killed his beer with a long tilt of his head. “Don’t worry, I’ll buy you a drink or two.” He got up. “Meet us in the lobby at nine.”

The next day, everyone boarded the bus hungover.

I was complaining about a bruise I received from almost falling down the subway stairs because of my heeled boots. A drummer, Damnit, had caught my arm and kept me from cracking my head open. The bruise around my elbow was from where he grabbed me and yanked me back.

“Fuck, I woke up with the biggest bruise and I don’t know even where it came

from,” said the trumpet, Fluffer.

“You fell down the stairs on the boat,” someone recalled.

“Where’s the bruise?” I asked.

“Here,” he said, turning. And before anyone could protest he had his pants down.

The sight of Fluffer’s hairy bare ass would have been disgusting enough, but his left buttock down to the crook of his knee was blackened to the color of the harbor at night. We screamed in protest and laughed at his pain.

“Jesus, put that thing away!” Brett ordered as he boarded the bus, “Shit, Fluffer, donors are going to be in here. What’s wrong with you?”

He pulled his pants up and tried not to cringe as he sat on the red cushioned seats.

Everyone needs a benefactor. In Hong Kong, we had plenty. We had been invited to play in the Lunar New Year Parade and the USC alumni had sponsored our trip. Not only was our travel, food and hotel on their tab but they were paying us *per diem* as well. And what did our sugar daddies want in return? Music. And lots of it. They were paying out thousands of dollars for our presence and instead of treating us like servants they acted as though we were the rock stars, that our company was doing them a favor. We played gigs for the city. Gigs for Johnny Wong. Gigs for the Marco Polo, the alumnus-owned hotel we stayed at. Gigs at a mall or two that more alumni owned. They loved us. We played all day so we could play all night.

Growing sick of heavy Chinese food every meal, JimBob and I went to the Hard

Rock one night. He got a hamburger that smelled suspiciously of pork. I tried an order of Oxtail soup.

“Is that Michael Jackson over there?”

I turned to the bar. It was. But not the pop star. He was referring to Dr. Michael Jackson, the Dean of Student Affairs at USC, a Vice President of the University. He was with a donor we didn’t recognize, and they had several empty beer glasses in front of them.

“You want to go chat with them?”

“Why not?” I surprised myself by saying.

We had only met him four days earlier in the security line at LAX. But either the night’s beers or the presence of big money made Dr. Jackson jovial enough to greet us like old friends. He put his arms around both of us in the way that alcohol makes you too friendly. Did we have dinner yet? Yes, we did. Did we have enough drinks? Of course not. Drinks are expensive. And there’s never enough of them. “Whatever you want. On me,” he said.

Before this trip, I never would have had the confidence to accept such generosity from a virtual stranger. But it was like the rest of our trip—someone taking care of us because of what we meant to them. I was drunk and enjoying myself. And I realized that I wasn’t a stranger to any of these sponsors, I was a symbol. A symbol of USC, of college, of youth. A symbol they wanted to bask in the presence of to relive their own experiences. It would have seemed ungrateful if I didn’t oblige.

Hard Rock Hong Kong had something I never saw in any Hard Rock before: “12

Shots and Still Standing.” Finish them all and you get a free t-shirt. Ask any band member and they’ll say the same thing: “I’ll do anything for booze and a free t-shirt.”

Our first toast was to Dr. Michael Jackson, for buying us the drinks. Band members enjoy yelling a whistle command before shots.

“Tweee-yeee-eet! Tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, DOWN.” Down it went.

Our second toast was to Dr. Bartner.

“Tweee-yeee-eet! Tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, DOWN.”

Our third toast: Johnny Wong. And his cowboy hat.

“Tweee-yeee-eet! Tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, DOWN.”

At sometime around the sixth or seventh toast, all toasts became “...to Sean Jenkins!” A TA in our section who was sweaty, loud, awkward and abrasive in a clumsily loveable way.

We earned our t-shirts in less than two hours. Dr. Jackson shook our hands as though we were valedictorians of the University, or, better yet, million dollar donors. Several other tables of band members had joined us in the bar and it was time for the evening to continue.

“Are you going to go out with us?” I asked Dr. Jackson.

“You know, I think I might,” he said with a grin.

You’ve never lived until you’ve danced to “Billie Jean” on top of a bar in Kolwoon with the Dean of Student Affairs.

After the parade, we boarded Johnny Wong's yachts again to watch the fireworks from the bay. It was one of our last nights in Hong Kong. The fireworks were ridiculous. I knew I would never see more like them in my life.

Brett found me soon after they were over and asked if I was going out with them again. I had spent all the money in my bank account and my *per diem* on presents for my family, jade and tailored suits. I had gone out every night of the trip and never paid for a drink. I had almost no money, but I was drinking on a yacht in Hong Kong with all of my friends, people I could count on to take care of me. And I'd never felt richer. I'd never had the confidence or self-respect before to feel like I could deserve to be taken care of. If you surround yourself with good people and act like you belong, no one—maybe not even you—will question it.

“Of course I'll go. I'll see you later.”

THE POTENTIAL ENERGY OF A SOUSAPHONE

Tuba Joke

Question: What's the range of a tuba?

Answer: Twenty yards if you've got a good arm.

Response: Who the hell can throw a tuba twenty yards?!

FRESHMAN YEAR

I fell. Jessica's face disappeared in white. We had been sight-reading "Kids Aren't Alright," I set the tuba down, Jessica came over and then... nothing... Fainting is like waking up in a strange place without having realized you fell asleep. I heard voices first (*What happened? I don't know. She said she didn't feel good and then she just fell over.*) and opened my eyes second, vision refocusing like a white sheet had flown over me, covered everything for only a moment and then disappeared into haze instead of lifting off again. I was positioned on the ground, my left arm over my face and my knees bent and together to the side, posed in "classic swoon position." Jessica and the TAs slammed me with questions. *Are you OK? What happened? Are you sick? Have you had enough to eat today? Have you been drinking? Any chance you could be pregnant?* But there was nothing wrong with me other than my own mind choosing unconsciousness for a few moments. And I was embarrassed. Ashamed that my body betrayed me by portraying weakness. "Is my horn ok?" I asked them.

SENIOR YEAR

I jumped. Closing my eyes to the glare of the water, I felt the sousaphone around me lifting up, weightless, as we fell together the fifteen feet to the lake below. When I slammed into the surface, the horn slammed into the back of my neck. If something had hit my head that hard and I wouldn't have been underwater I would have been spinning, dizzy, maybe even enough to fall to the ground. But in the lake the metal around me was in charge of my descent, separate from the concussed dizziness, and I sunk at a panicking speed. I imagined the sousaphone tightening around me like a snake. *Remember the plan*, I told myself. *Don't let it take you*. I kicked my legs and pushed against the heavy instrument, pulling myself out of and around it. I kicked and my foot hit hard against the horn, already rushing past me in the opposite direction. The force of the kick broke a toenail and blood threaded behind me in the water. I hit the surface and pulled air deep into my lungs. Lake Tahoe sparkled. Twenty feet below me, the brass of the sousaphone hit bottom and sparkled there too. I treaded water. My lungs pulled air in and out. My neck and foot throbbed but I loved it. I was alive. "It's fine." I called to the other tuba players all watching, waiting with their horns on the dock above me. "Jump!"

THE RUN

When I was in Band, we went to the FedEx Orange Bowl my junior year. After the win, after the award ceremony, after every member of the Team conducted a round of *Conquest!* on top of the ladder, and after the lengthy post-game show, the tuba players were the first band members on the field. The stadium was now mostly empty except for us and a large, Zamboni-type machine cleaning confetti off the field. Lazy tubas as usual, we set our instruments down to wait for everyone else to hourglass through one gate onto the field so the Band could form a block and march out of the conquered stadium.

Dr. Bartner's neck veins popped out as he screamed at some drummers who were not moving fast enough for his liking. He pointed wildly.

"Crap, look at him. He's like a crazy person," JimBob said to me.

"I know, right? We won. He should be happy." The Old Man's shrill whistle blew in-between his commands.

"He's always like this when we win," TA Bob said, sidling up to us. "And he acts happy when we lose. I mean, it's not that he's actually happy if we lose or anything, but he just acts opposite of how we act. He's afraid of losing control."

I considered this possibility and watched Dr. Bartner climb down from the ladder while yelling obscenities at Dr. Karl.

"You know," Bob said after a moment, "when I was in Band, after the last game of the season—especially a game like this—we would go out to the center of the field and

roll around in the paint...” TAs tend to begin too many statements with “When I was in Band...” *When I was in Band, there was more spirit. When I was in Band, people marched harder. When I was in Band, people partied harder. When I was in Band, people did lines of coke in the tunnel before games.* I always wanted to remind them that they still *were* in Band and could do any of those things they wanted if they thought it really would make the Band better. But I didn’t even correct Bob about the fact that we had gone and rolled in the center painted area on the fifty-yard line my freshman year, with a losing record that resulted in the termination of the previous coach and our last game of the season in the coliseum which was followed by no post-season. Bob suggested it then, too. The memory of it was pleasant enough: a fun and relaxing roll in painted grass making us look like idiots who were only happy to be off their feet for the first time in twelve hours. And no one—Dr. Bartner, Dr. Karl, and Tony Fox—had cared.

I looked over at JimBob. Before I could speak, he answered me, “We should do it.”

I bit my lip. “But look at him,” I said without bothering to look over at what the Old Man was doing then, beating a drummer over the head with a shoe or microphone, perhaps, “he’ll go nuts.” Others in the section were watching us now; looking to join whatever shenanigans we were planning. JimBob and I were only juniors, but we had already been chosen as next year’s co-section leaders. We were the new leadership.

“He’s already fucking crazy, Teresa.”

A common phrase from our marching band popped into my head: “Don’t be a leader; be an asshole.”

“We’ll get in trouble...” I said.

“What’s he going to do to us if we all do it?”

I said nothing, but looked at his face. His entire countenance was lit up, and I wondered if the jubilation of winning had made him drunk. But I felt drunk too, even though, for once, I wasn’t. The win—hell—the run of wins this season had been a surprise. A gift. We didn’t know then that Coach Carroll would go on to win three national championships, that we were heading into an era at USC where a BCS Bowl would be expected every year. For all we knew, this could be the football highlight of our lives. JimBob tensed, as though ready to spring. I realized I wanted my own story to tell future band members. I wanted my own highlight reel.

It is difficult to say which one of us sprinted away from the group first, but before I could think any more about consequences, I found myself flying toward the fifty-yard line. I’m not a runner. A sixteen-minute mile in high school PE could be achieved only at my greatest efforts. But this was the most exhilarating sprint of my life. The echo of one hundred thousand people’s last applause still hung thick in the Miami humidity. My woolen band uniform and my exhaustion from the day’s work seemed to whisk off me. And although running at my full speed, the passing lines seemed to slow down. Somewhere, I heard *Chariots of Fire* playing. Running had never before felt like freedom. Like living in the moment. Like being alive.

I slid my best “homerun” slide into the FedEx Orange Bowl symbol in the middle of the field. JimBob and Colby were already there. Brian and Fat Bastard followed. There were about eight of us total, rolling around like prize pigs in a mud puddle. I didn’t notice until later that it was not the entire section.

I only had about two or three good rolls in when *Chariots of Fire* died out of my ears and was replaced by a frantic, shrill whistle, getting louder and louder.

“Run!” someone yelled.

Dr. Bartner, seventy years old, came at us, arms pumping back and forth and legs propelling him towards us incomprehensibly fast. Far behind him, Dr. Karl came too, waddling like Obie, the fruit-shaped Orange Bowl mascot.

We jumped up and split. The flute section later described the scene to me like a lion attacking the herd on the Discovery Channel. A frenzied herd becoming chaos to escape their attacker.

I saw the confetti Zamboni and ran towards it. He could only catch one of us, right? He wouldn't be able to catch us all. Maybe I'd escape behind it and he wouldn't be able to pick me out once I got back to the group. I darted dangerously close to it (did the driver get nervous I'd be sucked into the confetti garbage?) and went around to the other side.

The band came in sight, a mere forty yards away, but before I could take another step in front of me, the Old Man was there, in my face. He grabbed me and shook me.

“What the fuck are you doing? I'll kick you out of band! I'll kick you out of school!” Spit flew at me and he shook me back and forth with a one-handed grip on my left arm. “You're supposed to be a leader, Goddamnit!” I could feel him sucking the life out of my body with his death grip. To my horror, nervous laughter at the intensity of the situation left my mouth.

“Are you fucking laughing? I'll kick you out! You're out!”

The flute section and the rest of the band watching from the stands, trying to discover which poor soul he had captured, identified me by the bouncing cords of braided hair as he shook me back and forth.

He dragged me back to the endzone, where the rest of the section waited. “Who ran? Who?” He threw me to the side and grabbed at people, trying to make the culprits line up for punishment. Some denied it. Bob—most of the TAs—had not run. But when he guessed the correct people, those of us that ran did not deny our guilt.

He yelled. Holy shit he yelled. “You’re right, I’m sorry, Dr. Bartner,” is usually enough to pacify him, but no one could even finish the sentence before he was yelling more.

“And you two! You’re supposed to be the future of the band! You’re supposed to be the leaders!” he screamed at JimBob and me.

I tried to apologize again, but he just looked disgusted, and walked away.

I’m not one who usually gets into trouble, and part of me knew I should have felt horribly guilty at that moment. But for some reason, I was elated. I felt a little bad for laughing at him when he first grabbed me. But I rationalized it as a nervous defense mechanism (I also laugh at the pinnacle of a roller coaster). Most strangely, I felt excited—prideful even—that I was the one who was caught.

“Are you all right?” people asked me for the rest of the night.

“Yeah, I’m great,” I said. And meant it.

“How the hell did you get caught and not Fat Bastard?” I guess I’m that slow of a runner.

I'm not going to say there wasn't any fear. I didn't want to get kicked out of band. I definitely didn't want to get kicked out of school for that incident, although I wasn't sure if he really had that kind of power or if he was just yelling it in the heat of the moment.

But my fear didn't last long enough to ferment into its normal cloak of guilt-ridden anxiety. Dr. Bartner cornered me in the breakfast line at the hotel the next morning. "Terr-eesa," he said coming at me though I had clearly been trying to steer my tray away from him, "my new favorite tuba!" I wasn't sure if his statement came from senility or sarcasm, so I replied with a simple, "Good Morning, Dr. Bartner..." He pulled me aside, tugging at my right arm (and not the left one), and began with a sigh, "Egh... my *wife* says I have to apologize to you. So you don't sue me." He paused long enough for me to realize that this statement was indeed, by itself, intended to be taken as the apology, so I said in reply, "No, it's ok. You're right. We shouldn't have done that and we were totally out of control. We just got a little excited, and—"

"You're right. You guys were assholes!" he said. He gave me a little half nod, then turned and walked away.

When I changed into a tank top later that day, I realized my left shoulder had a blue hand-shaped bruise from where he had grabbed and shook me. I adored this small badge of valor, and showed it to everyone until it faded a couple days later.

Years afterward, I would always begin my story with: "When I was in Band..."

MORE EDGE

In high school, my band director would sometimes ask us to play “R.F.L.”—*Real Fucking Loud*—swearing at his teenage students to emphasize how seriously he meant the command. But even the best high school R.F.L. couldn’t compare to Jessica’s tuba sound, marching around the corner and straight for my virginal soul that summer orientation night at USC. She played louder than my entire high school band by herself. Her secret? Edge.

What *is* Edge, you might ask?

“Elton John said our edge is a solid wall of sound.”

“Pedal tones. Face-melting sound.”

“Playing so loud it’ll peel the skin off a person standing in front of you.”

“It’s the exact opposite of Dr. Bartner’s “string bass” ideal tuba sound. 117+ decibels at ten meters. Consistent distortion.”

“Trying to play so loud that you caused the stadium lights to pop and your balls to climb up in your sac.”

“The decibels alone will cause ears to bleed and the blood vessels on Art’s forehead to explode.”

“I once heard that a good edge is like a baseball bat. It starts with a solid, dark core, but then you wrap that core in barbed wire, douse it with alcohol and light it on fire.”

“A level of volume and vibration that, beyond hurting their ears and putting the fear

of God into them, will unravel your foe's DNA (preventing them from procreating). In the case of small bears and Nazis, their faces will melt. Now you know what was inside the Ark.”

“The empirical concept of “Edge” is an acoustical phenomenon, akin to the aural experience of five hundred sets of fingernails scraping across a blackboard, while someone else is pounding into your skull with a bottle of Jack Daniels, while elsewhere a frequency oscillates at such low BPS that, while you can’t actually hear the tone, the very air around you turns to liquid, and you involuntarily evacuate your bowels.”

“Inter-frequency modulation on the higher order harmonic components in addition to the IFM of the root frequencies... This will be on the test...”

Edge was what I wanted. I longed for it. I dreamt of it. Because to have Edge was to have power. Without it you were nothing. I was nothing. I could be liked as a person (a female and therefore a sex symbol in a section of tuba boys amongst which it’s easy to win a beauty contest), maybe I could even be admired as a musician if I was good enough (I wasn’t). But unless I had Edge I wouldn’t be a real member of the Trojan Marching Band. There is a secret to Edge. Something I learned to get by the end of my time in band. And although it’s a secret no one has to tell you once you deserve it; you find it on your own. You have to give into the Edge completely. Give it all your air. All your muscles. All your anger and fear and joy. Edge is the secret language in band. A code. The way to happiness. The way to life. To play so loud that it hurts, the sound distorts, but becomes greater, something different completely. More than sound. Moving you beyond human. Into a beast. A member of the band that can’t do anything wrong.

The more Edge I got the safer I felt. And it's something, years later, I long for now. I miss. I want more. But you can only have Edge when you're playing. You can't take it with you.

WORKS CITED

“Catholic Center History.” *USC Catholic Center*. 2010 USC Catholic Center. Web. 27 November 2010. <<http://catholictrojan.org>>