

LIV LANSDALE



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CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------|----|
| Couples Therapy | 4 |
| Author Notes | 14 |

Couples Therapy

SUITCASE / LETTERS

Our basement had a trapezoidal space under the stairs where we kept all the suitcases. When my mom left there were three of us, thirty suitcases, and in my recollection, no more than five vacations.

Things that don't add up don't subtract either. I wish I could fill that luggage with half the memories of my brother's girlfriends, surrogate sisters, but I can only watch them fill with lint. The suitcases, that is. My brother would try to convince me there were mice in the suitcase space, but every time I'd check I'd only find moths. Then I'd throw his exercise ball at him and miss, every time.

My favorite toy as a kid was this stack of enormous rubbery puzzle pieces that had letters in the middle you punch out. Each piece was arm-length; the letters reached my elbow. I'd spend hours assembling them into some kind of Baby Mozart-y house. My mom was never impressed. I'd pretend the finished product was a space ship, come to terrorize the Victorian dollhouse. The imaginary ladies and gentlemen would stand on the little porch and say "Egads," but my imagination wasn't that sweeping so they'd rarely say more than that. Once I got a butler to wrangle one of the moths and head for the cosmos but the plot fizzled in the thinning atmosphere, especially after I tried to turn it into a musical.

When my brother got sick it was like there were only two of us, and the suitcases disappeared like they'd all decided to vacation without us. What my brother lost in muscle mass he made up for in charm. As for me, I have a box of punched out letters. I'm still trying to imagine a story that only needs a poke or two to feel self-contained. It doesn't need to get kicked to the curb, only to part ways with the banister, to roll merrily along.

BATHTUB / CANDLE

I tried to make perfume when I was eight because I had weak bladder control and weaker chops to tell anybody about it. I'd traipse around with my brother's mechanical pencils and stab them in tree trunks for sap extraction. I'd throw it in the microwave with pads of moss I'd jammed into a measuring cup, then add the steaming results, cup by cup, to a bathtub full of floral weeds upstairs.

I knew perfume involved some liquid that would kill things so into the tub went all the vinegar and rubbing alcohol and nail polish remover in the house. I stomped on the lot of it, dancing a little, like a winemaker I learned about in our Ancient Greece unit in school. I called what I was making "honeysuckle" though I didn't actually know what honeysuckle was (I added our jars of honey, too). I liked that the concoction was the color of pee. I'd worked so hard I wouldn't admit that it smelled worse.

I wasn't good at math back then but I was good at margins. On any given homework assignment you could find wild circuses, lacy dress designs, sleeping jungle animals, whatever struck my fancy. The other elementary school math failures were less creative, priding themselves on their ability to space their name just right so it filled the line at the top of the page. This is why whenever it was someone's birthday, I would decorate the cards and they would sign their names.

My teachers worried that my slowness was symptomatic of something going on at home. I only know this because I'm thirty-four now and I finally realize something *was* going on at home. Back then I only knew that I couldn't get away with taking over an hour to eat dinner in the week following parent-teacher conferences – and usually not even a week, as giving up was a talent both of them had already perfected, maybe even before my brother was born.

I bring up the math homework because one day I thought it would be cool to use my finger to stamp a spot of perfume onto the bottom of the page. I'd already gotten soup on it so I figured what the hell. I left my food on the table and went up to my bathroom. But the tub was empty, and even the weeds that hadn't made it into the tub yet were crammed hastily in the window box just outside, smothering the birds nest that didn't have any eggs yet but still. I was mad, so I sat on the toilet lid and hummed until one of them noticed. When they didn't I went to bed.

That week I started making candles.

THRESHOLDS / LAKE

When my brother and I were kids, our parents' fights began ending with "Can't take it anymore," so our aunt convinced them to send us to summer camp, or as she called it, "O northern land of logs and string and hand-clap games."

The lake at camp knew itself like an adult. Very deep and still. I was afraid of the cold but my brother would run in and stand in it up to his scarred-up knees. His feet were scarred-up too. He was always holding rocks. He only skipped the ones with little pits in them.

Between rocks he'd tell me stories about cool girls my age going back in time. In return I'd make rhymes for new clapping games. When I'd run into him with his friends he'd recite them at the top of his voice like they were some birdcall. Me being the bird. I've never seen him lean in a doorway but whenever I see someone else do it I picture him. He was like that.

Some of the spoons in the food lodge were bigger than others. The two biggest I stole and kept in my pocket. Sometimes I worried the pointy ends would create holes in my pocket and that the spoons would slip through and not be together any more.

PRINCESS / CHAMPAGNE

In the room across from mine in the girls' dorm by the student center, I once knew a Psych major who rarely laughed but was willing to go by "Princess." Possibly on account of her having been deaf in one ear. Serious girl. Father a budding alcoholic. The photos she had in her wallet of her mother, a hairdresser, reminded me of ones my mom had of herself. The hair was so straight. Princess's roommate, a foreign exchange student, masked her undiscovered lesbianism in meanness (Princess's curling irons would go missing and whatnot), so Princess spent a lot of time lounging in my room.

I went to her house over Thanksgiving break. There was nothing remarkable aside from a refreshing shortage of flower arrangements. I liked it immediately. I wasn't good at making conversation in those days – we'd discussed Ming and her latest girlfriends to death – so we watched a movie. She was good with her DVD player; the operation seemed to involve a dozen buttons, which she hit with swift intensity. By the dozenth button it occurred to me she too was a rotten conversationalist, and that for all our lounge time, silence was what we'd really had in common. That, or the thing about our dads. I sat down.

And sat back up. I had sat on a bottle of champagne. "Princess," I said, "what just happened?" Her hearing ear was, I presumed, the one closer to the suddenly roaring MGM lion on the widescreen.

I don't remember her answer. Or what my parents did that Thanksgiving, the first of their first reconciliation. But I remember last week. I got called in to the principal's office at three o'clock in the afternoon. My daughter got in trouble for hitting a boy. The principal and I said little to one another. We just gave my daughter napkins for her demure and incorrigible tears. "He was mean," was her explanation. "Mean how?" the principal pressed. No dice.

On our way to the parking lot, her slippery hand lax in my own, I decided it was high time I tell her about the world. "There are two types of people." She looked behind her, a little Eurydice. "There are Princesses and then there are bottles of champagne." I just wanted to be sure she was listening.

LOTION / VERONA

Before I took my postcolonial narrative class, when I got dry skin I'd think about how much I'd have to spend on hand cream if I got a nose job. There's probably special nose cream but I'd never go that far. One operation is less of a vanity trip than the sum of all the trips I could make just for that stuff that comes in little sample kits shaped like the lateral view of a wedding ring. They say the little bit of glitter in the gunk is from some kind of healthful mica but I don't believe it. Minerals aren't healthful. People are. Some of them. Write that in your law and smoke it, saleslady.

These days when I apply hand cream I think about Eurydice, all the ways a person can turn to stone. My postcolonial narrative professor was some kind of Crabtree addict, and my critical essays would always come back with these sketchy grease prints. That would have been okay if he hadn't gone so overboard on the Sartre. I'd wanted to take a Shakespeare class but someone in my family called just before registration and they would have hung up if they'd known but I lost track of time, as I tend to do when someone in my family calls.

The last time they called, I decided to start an on campus humor lit mag. I needed all the laughs I could get with these people. But then I discovered campus already had one and what's worse, everyone in it was funnier than me. So I decided to make one only for dick jokes. Three by fifteen inch margins or something cray like that. I wanted to call it ART THOU FISH, because this college is a highbrow crowd, and because that's about as far as I can make it through *Romeo and Juliet* before getting sick of ol' fair Verona. When I gave out copies of the first issue at the extracurriculars fair lots of people thought it was a cookbook. I thought that was funny, at least.

I have sneezed three out of the last five times I tried to impress my postcolonial narrative professor. "But don't you think Agamben... ACHOO!" The class is really amused. None of them appear to have hand cream allergies. I glanced behind me, just once, to guesstimate how many were already messaging about it. At least three. Two of them have had nose jobs, I'd bet anything. They ought to mind their own business.

CHOCOLATES / LIMO

I backpacked through Europe for my twenty-first because I was a fool. I got stuck in Paris in the rain, on Montmartre. A lone guy on his way down from the Sacre-Coeur said to me, “This stuff is ephemeral. Yet eternal. You know what I mean!” He didn’t understand that the statement is a question. I tried to think of rhetorical exclamation and couldn’t. I wondered how he could tell I was an American, and then realized how lost I looked. I knew I looked lost because loss had become a permanent feature of my face. Like a third eye.

I hadn’t tried European chocolate yet. I was waiting to do it in that windmill whorehouse, or maybe on one of those bridges with all the lovers’ locks on the railings. I checked my surroundings. Mr. “Ephemeral” was a few chunks of stairs below. I asked a heavy-set couple where to go for chocolate; to my surprise, no English. At the base of the hill I saw a soaked set of newly-weds clamor into a limo. I couldn’t tell if they were happy. I knew I wouldn’t be able to tell close-range, either.

I hadn’t planned on going to prom in high school. I stayed home three out of the four years, but got roped into it as a senior. It was a friend who’d just come out of the closet and was hell-bent on going back in. After downing a single flask of bootlegged vodka, he ditched me for one of our linebackers. Then I went to state school and tried to get wild and he went to art school and tried to re-popularize Fauvism. He got high up the ass one time and mailed me a postcard that read, “Your heart is very precious to me.” In those days, our culture was refining its treatment of irony, one individual at a time. I stayed out of that; I didn’t write back.

Things hip adults don’t tell you about their formative backpacking adventures is that when they ran out of money they went home right away. When I ran out of money I took up pickpocketing for three days and four nights and then got beat up by someone smaller than myself. Uncanny. One moment you’re slipping your hand in a fanny pack the next all the boulevards are eerily green. Hélas, the power of proximity. I never got to try the chocolates, a regret that darkened like pavement when I got caught in the rain a second time the day before my flight home. C’est la vie! I approached the nearest stranger and asked him how to say “ephemeral” in French. His English was stunning but I don’t remember his answer.

CUFFLINKS / LIPSTICK

I quit illustrating children's books when I thought I wouldn't have children. I became a copy-editor because putting little marks on pages for people couldn't be so different than putting marks on pages for little people. I stopped seeing the ones who didn't laugh at that, and soon found myself getting lots of copyediting done.

The thing about being an adult as a child is that you don't fit any of the shoes they give you. Just kidding, the shoes fit fine. It's that you have to keep your sticker collection a secret, trading them in the schoolyard long before your parents show up. They pick you up at the same time and start reciting whatever they just heard on the BBC, which is part of why you're already an adult.

I'm not a lipstick-wearing adult, though. After a birthday party at a classmate's house, I come home in her lipstick because that's all they had to play with (single mom). My parents are livid. I have to talk them out of calling my friend's mom. I don't mention that I nabbed a stick of her eyeliner too.

That night I go to their room when they're asleep and hold my dad's cufflinks in my hand. They feel like teeth. I think about stealing them, hoping it would keep my dad from going to so many fancy events.

The other thing I've been thinking about is hiding myself under a back-up tux and tucking myself into the backseat of his car. I wouldn't have lipstick on so the tux would be okay and I'd be able to make a joke about that when I got found out. I'd get found out because my mom would never think to pack him a spare tux because she hates that he goes to fancy events, too. My plan doesn't extend past getting caught. I just want to see if he'd outright send me away.

I took up drawing when I decided to elaborate my plan. I designed the ball gown I'd wear at the gala, and even styled the hairpiece, but I needed to get the nuts and bolts just right. The mechanics of the stilts were delicate; too tall and I'd arouse suspicion. I was on the second stilt, realizing it wasn't identical to my first one, when his car left. Then I wrote a story about a man whose car breaks down but I never finished it because I needed to look up how to spell "Poughkeepsie."

SAILBOAT / MOONLIGHT

Grandmother Mary expresses anger with presents. When I was seventeen she didn't like overhearing me say "fuck" in front of my nephew when I fell on the deck of her husband's sailboat. I'd tripped over an oar. Who keeps oars on a yawl? She didn't answer. We were in the Lake Erie doldrums, a phrase usually reserved for a frame of mind but this time literal, too. She let a few minutes pass then handed me a white square that said "STIM-U-DENT" on it, from Johnson & Johnson: "for the plane back to Charlotte," she said. It looked like it was from 1973. Inside: 25 orange slats of wood that smelled like mojitos.

I like the idea of "fuck" being an object, and a weird-ass object at that. As it turns out though, STIM-U-DENT was on to something. From the time I stuck a slat between my teeth and iced my leg to the time the ice pack melted to reveal a North Carolina – shaped aubergine bruise, my mouth felt the way my mind feels after a slasher flick. Part of me knew my nephew was trying to explain how to tack to Gran Mary, but the rest of me floated in minty bliss, dreaming of summer camp.

Looking back, some of it makes sense. The women in my family don't wrap dental floss around their fingers because too many people are already there. I mean, Grandpa never liked sailing. But we girls like ropes, and being on a certain end of them during man-overboard drills. That oar on deck was probably for a lifeboat we've hidden in the galley unbeknownst to our own brothers. I was still looking for it years later when my daughter called from college. I wanted something outrageous to report. She was making few A's and fewer friends. I told her to join the rowing team, be the little shouter at the bow. Inflict her bad mood on her peers in a safe, controlled environment, and get a tan. I could tell she missed her dad because she said *I love you* before she hung up.

That night I dangled my feet off the stern and called Johnson & Johnson. I had a loose script all set up: "Step 3 says not to 'force into tight spaces between teeth.' Does that mean I should floss, too? How do I reach those dark, damp little crevasses? Do you realize the absurdity of the phrase 'gentle in and out motion?' Have you personally tested this product?"

I looked at the moonlight on the railing. No one's snoring could be heard over the water. I wondered what I'd hear the next morning if the railings disappeared.

WHITE HORSE / ISLAND

For a while, my brother was able to bury our childhood grief in *The Lord of the Rings* fandom, but all I liked from all that was Shadowfax. You whistle, he calls, you ride off. Lots of people whistle when they're lonely, and people in movies whistle to fake innocence. If the world went my way, a big-ass white horse would show up in all of those situations, and take those people off to where the *real* action is. What I mean to say is, my parents should have stayed separated the first time around.

I've never been able to whistle. I don't like calling attention to myself. My poetry-writing first boyfriend was really good at it but he was also unoriginal. He did it the movie way, even though he wasn't aware of all the things he should have felt guilty for.

He used to say no man is an island, and I always thought he meant islands were for women. I also thought that because I got smashed at my aunt's bachelorette party on Mackinaw, and I tend to get poetic when I'm drunk. Of course I didn't know that because before that night my only exposure to alcohol had involved pouring it over forsythia and stomping on it. I don't remember drawing these, but I still have a bunch of the off-white country club napkins bearing sketches of my youth: figure one, little girl pouring milk on moss; figure two, little girl stripping leaves from saplings; figure three, little girl raiding the neighbor's beehives.

My daughter has them now. If she still does.

After that night I didn't want to get drunk. I didn't want to act like dad. Clearly my relationship with nature was conflicted enough; if I let myself fret over genetics I'd melt down and make a scene.

RING / FIREPLACE

A little before my parents' first separation the local Home Depot started selling logs that burned different colors. My parents think their biggest mistake raising us was not buying us any – jealous of his friends' families, one night my brother borrowed my Dad's axe without telling any of us, filled our bathtub with wood and wall paint, and tried to see if he could make a light show with Mom's hand mirror. I caught him before the house caught fire. We kept chipping flakes of paint off the side of the bathtub for weeks, and though we thought we could bathe fine, our parents started looking at us like we weren't clean and we slowly began to believe them.

I got back at them by stealing mom's wedding ring from the creepy white hand on her nightstand. I put it in a box in another box. They kept going until I had a seven-layer Russian doll of boxes to cram in the back of my underwear drawer. When I showed her three weeks later she grounded me for as long as my brother because I'd also stolen two of her bras, convinced surely I'd need them soon, and forgotten about them when it turned out I was wrong. I was only in trouble for a little bit though because Dad was in worse trouble than either of us.

My first marriage fell apart for very different reasons, but I still hate fireplaces. My desire to contain everything manifests itself in my forgetting to open the flue. I consequently found myself dusting all the time, and saw my husband less and less clearly. I felt dirty, like I did as a kid. I bought perfume but it smelled like cleaning products. But maybe that was what he wanted – wife as maid. If our marriage had lasted, I would have been punished for voicing doubt in him. So I hijacked his car, ditching it in the airport parking lot a few hours before my flight to Europe.

My brother's widow lives around the corner from Gran Mary's old house. She takes the family to retreats every summer. I used to come with my daughter but she's in her father's camp now. Every year my nieces retell stories from the years before until there's no time left for all the adults to contribute. I politely quip a story of my own, always a made-up episode from my epic and formative backpacking adventures or a ghost story about my Victorian townhouse in Charlotte. Everyone believes me because by then they are all too tired to pay attention. They head to bed in our rented cabin while I put out the fire. Then I stay up and look out on Lake Erie. After a while I hear everyone's breaths synchronize from the second floor window, and know it's because they love one another. I never think about what their lives would be like otherwise.

Author Notes

Liv Lansdale is Book Reviews Editor for poetsatwork.com. Her favorite sentence of the 18th century is from Wollstonecraft, and refers to men as “bugbears.” She is actively seeking the perfect mojito.

About the Work

My parents were separating when I wrote this story, and I had recently picked up a copy of the delightfully titled lit mag, *Armchair/Shotgun*. I decided to start a project based on romantic tropes. Prose poetry has a rich history in objects (Ponge, Mallarmé, etc.) so I thought I’d pick some and split them with a slash. A loose narrative started to form so I downplayed the role of lyricism (realizing ruefully I could never be Ponge or Mallarmé) and decided this would be my first shot at flash.

Having only rarely attempted fiction in the past, the easiest part of the project was forgoing poetic concern, writing without thinking about line breaks or meter. But of course, for me, those elements of craft are more manageable than the gargantuan task of developing a person (or however you want to define fiction), so nearly all other aspects of the project felt unwieldy.

I didn’t know my narrator, or how she would talk. I didn’t know how to craft plot—which I maintain *is* really important, even in “literary” fiction. The object structure worked for me because it allowed me to chart her development around markers unrelated to plot. And no episodes would have emerged unless I’d challenged myself to incorporate the objects I’d chosen.

I wanted to go back to poetry exclusively since finishing *Couples Therapy*, but more conceits have come to mind. Some fiction writers claim their stories begin with an image, or a vision of a character—nothing like that happens for me, but I’ll sit down at an oddly themed restaurant and wonder, what if there were a story behind each of the wonky items on this menu? My early poetry relied heavily on lists. Hopefully someday my fiction will become less dependent on formulae the poems have.

Liv Lansdale on the Web

poetsatwork.org/poetry-book-reviews/