

5-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Steil, Sarah (2015) "Oblivious," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol3/iss2/7>

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SARAH STEIL

Oblivious

She's so still I don't notice her until I'm tripping over her. My mother is passed out on our living room floor, her pants around her ankles, the colorful fabric petunias of the carpet soaked beneath her. "Oh, fuck," I mumble, poking her with an exposed toe as the dogs come over to investigate. "Mom," I whisper, leaning over her, shaking her, "you've got to get up."

The TV is on and flashing images color her body. Her thin, strawberry blonde hair is splayed out underneath her head, and her lips are slightly parted. Her breathing makes a clucking sound and quickens as her confused hazel eyes open. She is slow to wake, and as she lifts her small, waterlogged body from the floor, a knock on the door interrupts us. Peering through the window that looks out to the porch, I focus on two women in uniform waiting impatiently.

Suddenly, I am running upstairs and my siblings are emerging from their respective rooms as I open the door to the room I share with Alex. Lucas is behind me, bleary-eyed, half-awake, asking, "What is it? What's up?" Christina, always listening, is silent and watching us. Alex slowly pulls earbuds from her ears, as I explain, "Child Protective Services is here and mom's dead in the living room."

"Again? What the fuck do they think has changed in a month?" Alex gets up from her bed, and Christina, Lucas, and I bound down the stairs. My mother kneels before the TV with a butter knife in one hand, my 130-pound bullmastiff's collar in the other. Leo, bumbling, wags his tail as I approach, clueless as always as my mother slurs, "I gotta take his tail off. It's gotta come off."

I am coaxing my mother, slowly, into giving me the dulled knife as Christina coos Leo's name and slowly leads him into the next room. As I am getting my mother's fingers to uncurl, Alex is pushing past me, grabbing

at my mother with force. The knocks on the door are getting louder. Alex hisses, “Getthefuckup” in one quick word. When my mother refuses, Alex pulls harder and my mother whines like a small child with an even smaller lexicon. “Ouch! That hurts!”

Alex half-pulls, half-draws my mother into the basement. Lucas leads the dogs into the den. Christina drags a chair over the soaked section of the carpet. I open the front door and smile.

Lucas

One year later, Lucas walks into the kitchen with his hand draped across his forehead. “It’s so hot in here I think I’m going through menopause.” I get excited when he walks into the room, where we will sit for hours laughing, while I pour, and promptly forget about, a cup of tea. Lucas has my face, brown eyes, freckles, and the slightest cleft chin. Always walking on the tip of his toes, he will bound into the room twirling the back of his short curly hair into a cyclone, never completely on flat feet. He pulls the string to the ceiling fan, which hums above us, and sits at one of the falling apart, dog-chewed wooden chairs around the kitchen table.

The kitchen has become the epicenter of our house, and since our two oldest sisters moved out, my three other siblings and I spend most of our time there together.

Lucas stares at me as I place trays of cookie dough into the oven. “What are you making?”

I turn to him, tray in hand. “Cocaine.”

He purses his lips, nods, impressed. “Awesome. I just was thinking I’d give cocaine a try.”

I am closing the oven door, shooing away the dogs trying to nose their way in. “You know I would kill you,” I say, picking up my needy dachshund, Bruno, as he paws at my side.

Lucas twists his lips to one side of his face and thinks for a moment, his hands moving about wildly in front of him, punctuating his inner monologue. “There’s this kid in my geometry class and I like him, and he knows I like him, and he’s such a fucking douchebag.” He whines into his hand, bringing his forehead to the table. “Why do boys fucking suck?”

My back leans against the oven door, Bruno sleeping in my arms. “Why do you need to date someone? You’re fifteen. Get a job or something.”

“First of all, you bitch, you were dating someone at fifteen. Second of all, you bitch, I love you, and I’m going to go to college and have sex with as many boys as I want. And third of all, if I didn’t look like a fucking nematode, I would be doing that already.” He claws the skin on his face. “I’m so fucking desperate, I would let anyone use me.”

Lucas has the curse of constantly-feeling-like-shit-about-oneself that has been inherited by all five of my siblings. He will taunt me by talking like this, worrying me, because he knows it upsets me.

I roll my head back in exasperation. “Okay, first of all, you do not look like a nematode. We have the same face, so if you’re a nematode, I’m a nematode. Also, please don’t do stupid shit with boys. Boys are evil.” I pause, trying to keep up with everything he’s said. “Also, you bitch, you always mock me for saying shit about myself but you’re ten times worse.”

I fight with Lucas rarely. Most of the time I am laughing red-faced at something he said, unable to keep up with his fast-paced humor. I’ve seen him get really angry only once before, years earlier, when Alex threw out the *V* word: our father’s name. “You’ve got such a shitty temper, Lucas.” Alex, the Queen of Comeback, smiled with a venomous tongue. “Just like Vinny.” Comparing someone to Vinny was the hydrogen bomb of arguments, and Lucas, wounded, sputtered curses like a broken engine, eyes wide. While the curses flew, some viscous mess like *fuckingbitchshittheadasshole*, Alex merely stood and smiled. “Thanks for proving my point.”

Out of anyone that harbors resentment toward my mother, Lucas is most unforgiving. Often, in a room full of my siblings, we will debate our parents like political issues. “Who do you blame more?”

I, unequivocally, answer Vinny. Lucas is flabbergasted. “You always make excuses for Mom’s shit. Bailing is better,” he raises one finger, “than marrying a shithead,” and another finger, “and ruining our financial aid,” and another, “and being a general shithead.”

I sense, though Lucas will not admit this, that he resents her for being disappointed in him. Discovering my brother’s sexuality destroyed my mother, who then spread the news like a gossip tabloid. “My son is gay. *Gay*,” my mother would sob dramatically into the phone to random, distant relatives. She seemed to sadistically take pride in the news, as if it were another reason to feel sorry for herself. “On top of everything I have to deal with in my life,” my mother would say, somberly shaking her head, “now I have a gay son.”

Suddenly outed to cousins twice-removed, to friends of friends, and worst of all, to my mother’s husband, Lucas cut off my mother. “I feel like a fucking joke.”

Now, Lucas twirls his hair and looks up as Chris walks into our kitchen. “Hey, Princess. How was your nap?”

Chris, groggy, ignores him. “What are you making?”

“Cocaine,” Lucas answers, smiling.

Chris

Chris, with short dirty blonde hair that he's constantly brushing behind his ears, is often spoken over by the rest of us, and will sit with a dog in his lap and listen. He has cut his hair short since coming out to us the summer before, and bristles when my mother and her husband refer to him by his birth name or use female pronouns. Chris, sweet and timid, will giggle with the rest of us, interjecting randomly, mocking us and feeding the dogs from the table.

Chris's quietness unnerved me for a long time when I didn't quite understand it and associated silence with distance.

Finn, our Australian Shepherd and Chris's companion, wanders up to his lap, investigating for food. "Hey, baby Finn," he coos, petting him. I sing to Finn, high and off-pitched, "Oh Finn the Chin, Chin the Finn." Chris joins in with me, and Finn stands between us, twisting back and forth as Chris laughs.

It seems impossible to me now, to look at this smiling person and see him in a hospital gown. When I think of him then, ashamed with himself and too afraid to tell my mother he wasn't a girl, I want to raise a vindictive finger to my mother and say, "Whose fault is this? A bigot's and her husband's."

Christina, my sweet baby I could never figure out. Christina who told her teachers she slept with a knife under her pillow. Christina who wanted to hurt herself so badly, crying with matted hair as we played a supervised game of Go Fish.

We were allowed two hours of visiting time, and we brought heavy, messy Italian food to see her. In one of the aisles of the Children's Psychiatric Unit a woman in uniform told us where to find her, how long we could stay, what we could bring in with us. I felt protective over Christina, and when I saw her crying, unshowered, scared, small, asking us to please stay longer, I wanted to weep. Christina-who-was-never-really-Christina resented her name and her body, too scared to tell my worlds-away mother. Christina, who told the teachers she didn't want to be around anymore. These people, Christina and Chris, seem separated by entire lifetimes. Sometimes I wonder if my mother would rather have had her daughter die with the secret imbedded within her, than have her son live.

Out of anyone who harbors resentment against my mother, Chris is the most forgiving.

Chris, now fourteen, doesn't think about this past often, doesn't let my mother's doubts bother him. When my mother wants to come into his room, crying, "I have lost a daughter," he will simply close the door.

Chris, my companion, who wants to watch movies with me and walk to the supermarket late at night to get cookie dough, who guards my dogs protectively, who laughs at my dumb jokes, who tells me first when the kids at school tease him.

He will elbow me and whisper, “Should we tell Mom I’m not dead or let her figure that out later?”

Christina, crying as my drunken mother pushed her away. At thirteen, Christina begged my mother to leave her abusive husband, asked, “Don’t you love us more than him? Why are you choosing him?” Christina, who promised her forgiveness the very same night.

Chris will ask for a cookie while Lucas will just take one. He groans. “Mr. Roland called me Christina in front of the whole class.” He drags out the double *s* in *class*, letting it drift away slowly. “It was so embarrassing. Now he just calls me *C* cause he’s too awkward to say my name.”

“Did you correct him?”

Lucas, with chocolate across his fingers and face, chimes in, “Tell him to learn your name, or you’re going to sue him and his family for generations.”

Chris sighs and leans down to place his forehead against Finn’s. “No, I just stared at him awkwardly, and he stared at me awkwardly.” He grimaces, looks away as Finn scurries over to Alex walking in, who slowly removes her earbuds and comes over to the stove to examine the trays of cookies.

She appraises them like a paleontologist uncovering fossil bones, stroking her chin and pursing her lips. Finally, a verdict is reached: “You should’ve left them in longer.”

Lucas, from across the table, mumbles, “That’s what she said,” to which Chris responds with an obligatory “Heyo” and a high-five. Alex dismisses them. I am directly between Alex and Lucas in age, eighteen months younger than one, eighteen months older than the other. I am currently seventeen to Alex’s eighteen, though I am still a senior in high school and she is a freshman in college.

Alexandra

For the entirety of this first year of college, Alex will tell us about the wonders of independence, about her friends, classes, professors, grades. At the end of the year, when she transfers, she will tell me she had been miserable the whole time.

Alex, beautiful Alexandra, whose body is that of a crushed baby bird, whose collarbones form a basin for rain. Cat-like, she will pull up her shirt and stretch, stretch, stretch, encouraging her skin to roll along a timid ribcage.

Alex, out of anyone that harbors resentment toward my mother, is most direct with her anger. And yet somehow she grants my mother's opinions the most weight, will allow my mother's insults to dig into her skin like parasitic worms that attach to her spine and feed.

Alexandra, who had an eating disorder in high school, continues to shrink during her first year of college. Every time she comes home my mother will gush and beam, congratulate her on the weight loss, comment on how much more beautiful she gets by the day. My mother knew of my sister's sickness in high school, yet comments on her beauty during that first year of college extensively.

The year before, as her waist thinned, my mother looked down at me and sighed, "When did you get so much bigger than her?" I wanted to ask, "When did she get so much smaller than me?" I dragged my hand across my stomach, twisted extra fat in my hands, watched the way her stomach curved inward.

When she vomits into grocery bags and hides them in the closet so my mother will not see, I try to force myself to leer over the lip of our plastic toilet bowl, willing my insides to unfold. But I'm too scared.

When my mother places her hands on Alex's hips, and smiles, "Who knew you had such a beautiful body?" I want to place my hands around my mother's neck and shake until I hear bones crack.

In high school, we're clothes shopping before school starts, and in the changing room next to me Alex peels jeans on and off. My mother will retrieve the pants she flings over the changing room door, toss them over mine with a hurried, "Try these on." I refuse, and my mother insists, insists, insists, her voice raising with my objections. Flush-faced, I finally pull open the door and stammer, "I'm not going to try them on because they're not going to fit." My mother replies, "If they fit your sister why shouldn't they fit you?" I run cheese-doodle orange fingertips across my stomach and wonder the same thing.

To blame my sister's eating disorder on my mother would be unfair, but to deny it would also be unfair. When my mother is sober, and oozing over Alex's skeletal body, Alex smiles and beams. I wonder if Alex's aggression toward our mother when she is drunk is a realization of the hold she has on Alex's body, her perception of beauty. I wonder if, when Alex stops herself from eating, she hates that she wants my mother to see her as beautiful, to sigh contentedly, "Oh, Alex, you have such a nice body."

My mother's first realization that Alex had a problem arose in a mall changing room when we were in high school. Alex, at five-foot-five, and a little less than ninety-five pounds, was too small for any of the clothing the store sold. I whispered to my mother outside the door, "Don't you think it's strange that she's too small for everything here? Don't you think that's a problem?"

My mother dismissed me, blamed the clothing, but later that day she pulled Alex, then seventeen, aside and gave her a cup of Gatorade. "If you can drink this and keep it down," my mother said, "I won't bring you to the hospital." My sister's stomach, stunned by a rush of sugars and liquid, expelled the drink immediately, and Alexandra was in the hospital within the hour.

I think of this maternal act, my mother's realization, and I wonder how she chose to ignore Alex's shrinking body during her first year of college. I believe she thought she had saved her once, that the problem was solved, that Alex was okay and just losing a little weight naturally. When Alex leaves for college and returns with a very small body, my mother is slow to realize again. She will never actually know the things Alex does to herself. She is oblivious.

At the end of her first year of college, Alex will tell me the things she's done to herself over the year, the weight she's lost. She promises she is getting better and I believe her. However, in my kitchen standing next to her, I am not yet privy to this information.

For a long time I will envy her fragile bones, slender frame, hipbones that can feel the floor; I will translate "disorder" to "determination." Now, however, Alex's small body frightens me. Alex, sarcastic, loving, takes no shit, and I wonder how my mother weaseled her way into her skull. Alex, who will stand up for me when my mother is drunk, who does not shy from conflict, who doubts herself constantly, who challenges me to chocolate chip cookie bake-offs, who offered to beat up my very first bully in preschool, who is my first best friend. When we were younger, my mother would dress us the same, give us the same haircuts, the same Halloween costumes and Christmas gifts. She is my twin.

Therapy

Alex breaks off chunks from a pretzel rod and feeds them to my dogs, who gather like pigeons. "Where's Mom?" she asks, looking to me. I begin to answer, but she stops me and places a finger to her forehead, closes her eyes. "Wait! No, I know. I'm seeing...I'm seeing a bed. I'm seeing a fat, middle-aged man watching TV. She's in her room."

Lucas laughs, joins in, closes his eyes. "No, wait. It's...it's not her bed. It's Sarah's bed. It's Sarah's bed and she wants to...what? No. It's Sarah's bed and she's having sex with Rick on it. Oh, my God."

I groan, steal a pretzel from Alex and toss it across the table at Lucas.

He winks at me. "You're gonna wanna wash your sheets. That wasn't pretty."

Chris interrupts our laughter. "No, it's Thursday. They're both gone."

Thursday means our mother and her husband will not be in the house until at least 4:30 p.m. Thursday is court-mandated therapy day, a compromise for my mother not pressing charges against her husband for hitting her.

Thursday is wonderful, then, because we will do things we cannot do with our mother around, including running up and down the stairs screaming at the top of our lungs. Inevitably, one or all of us will yell colorful and amusing things including, but not limited to, “I hope the next time Rick stuffs his fat fucking mouth with our food he chokes and dies.” The dogs, roused by our wild rumpus, will howl in affirmation.

When my mother enters our kitchen an hour later, we’re telling jokes about her. We change the subject when she enters with her ask-me-about-my-day face, which usually includes a scowl, frowning eyes, and prolonged eye contact. She will pout, stare until one of us caves and asks, “What’s wrong?”

Chris takes the bait. My mother sighs deeply, and we think she’s going to laugh for a second and then she begins to sob. “Nothing. You kids don’t understand the shit I go through.” She chokes, drawing ragged breath. “You guys have had it so much easier.”

Alex raises her eyebrows at me, asks, “How did therapy go?”

My mother’s thin frame leans against the counter top. “Not good. It’s always not good.”

I gesture to Lucas and point to my mother, mouth, “Go hug her.”

Lucas places his finger to his nose. “No fucking way,” he mouths back.

I smile curtly, offer him a middle finger, and stand to hug my mother, but when I reach her, she coils inward with her arms pinned across her chest like a straitjacket and leaves the room.

Lucas rolls his eyes and offers a middle finger at her retreating back, and the three of us offer stunted laughter. “We’ve had it way too fucking easy,” he mumbles.