

5-1-2015

The Contract

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Recommended Citation

Silverstein, Elise (2015) "The Contract," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol3/iss2/9>

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ELISE SILVERSTEIN

The Contract

I should remind her that, for God's sake, when I was six, she took a sheet and tied me to my chair so I would sit and finish my dinner. She chased me around the table, slipping on the linoleum in her socks, and when she caught me, she yanked a sheet out of a nearby pile of laundry and tied my torso to the back of my chair so I couldn't get up. I must have screamed bloody murder for at least ten minutes before I started laughing my head off, still wriggling from side-to-side to get loose. She sat right next to me, legs crossed, flipping through a magazine, like I wasn't even there. Eventually, exasperated, she slapped her hand down on the table and said, "Just eat the goddamned mac and cheese, Cooper." And I did.

When she places a typed list entitled "New Rules" in front of my bowl of cereal, I look up at her like she has lost her mind. "Who are you and what have you done with my mother?" I ask.

"That's cute. That's real cute, Cooper," she says.

Last night when I climbed in through the window at the top of the fire escape, the green numbers on the microwave glared 2:07. I had spent the preceding hours convincing myself there was no way she would still be awake, but there she sat at the kitchen table. Her back was towards me and she was hugging one knee to her chest, the conjoined foot resting on her chair, as she raptly examined her cuticles. As soon as I was fully inside the apartment with the window shut behind me, I braced myself for an explosion. To fully ensure she understood my presence, I said, "Hi," to the back of her head, using a tone I had hoped might be taken as casual and sincere, but it came out all wrong (I had practiced it too many times in my head)—too enthusiastic, too loud, too drunk. She pretended not to hear me.

My brain hurt. My thoughts were spinning like socks in a washing machine, but I remember thinking, I wish she were the type of parent who would just beat the shit out of me. It's what I deserve, and both of us would benefit; I wouldn't feel guilty, and she would feel in control. In the silence, I felt the hum of the refrigerator pulsing through my body. For a moment I imagined the appliance was alive. Using the blood gushing through my veins as a vessel, parasitic sound waves were traveling from my toes up to my mind, intent on taking over.

All she said was, "I should break your fucking neck. You know that? I really should," outwardly appearing more weary than aggravated. She wasn't throwing plates or crying; her voice was level and controlled. I remember this confused me. She got up from the table to rinse her wine glass in the sink and without another word went to bed, leaving me standing there alone, trying to decide whether I was swaying back and forth or standing still. She didn't even give me a chance to tell her my phone had died. That's why I was late. That's why I didn't call.

Last weekend, at 1:56 a.m., I squeezed my body awkwardly through that same window. My mother came out of her bedroom, looking like a maniac—half-naked, half-asleep, screaming and slashing her pointer finger through the air. "Are you out of *your* fucking mind?" she cried. "You need to get this through that small little brain of yours: I worked twelve hours today! *Twelve* hours! And then I have to wait up for you to find yourself home? So Cooper can have a good time? No text, no phone call, nothing?" She stood there staring, like she expected some sort of response with her palms extended up and out, her eyes wild, her curly hair crazy.

"Mom, the neighbors," I said, joking. She took a plate out of the drying rack and, using all her strength, smashed it against the wall.

She looks so disgusted with me now as I sit at the kitchen table eating my cereal that I'm starting to lose my appetite. I stop eating and look up at her again, this time accusingly. "What?" I say. I haven't yet swallowed my last spoonful of cereal before speaking and milk dribbles from my open mouth back into the bowl I'm leaning over.

"I'm not kidding with you," she says as she begins to put dishes away, making zero effort not to bang pots together or slam cabinets shut. "I've had enough. I am done. You are going to read this and sign it, and you're going to follow these rules, and if you can't do that, then you're going to find somewhere else to live. Because it's not going to be here." I resume eating as I read over the list, smirking at this unique show of determination.

Most of her demands I think I can handle until she forgets about all of this. I know exactly the way things like this work. Like how Marcus was supposed to be grounded for three months, but after three weeks his dad couldn't stand him hanging around the house. Or how last summer Caroline was only

supposed to be allowed out three nights a week, but her parents actually never kept track once she finally shut up and agreed to go along. Gradually, my mother's restrictions will start to wear on my nerves and I will be forced to break the rules in order to regain some small facet of my sanity. At first, she'll say, "Cooper, have you forgotten about our rules?" and she'll pull her list off the fridge or out of the junk drawer to remind me of our contract, as if I don't have the brain capacity for memory. I'll say, "Yeah, Mom. Sorry." After that, I'll take that list and rip it into a million pieces, take it outside and watch as the pieces slip through my fingers and fall into the dark recesses of the dumpster behind our building. Finally, by the time things return to normal, her list will be recalled merely as an elaborate and impracticable effort. And both of us will remember how we knew from the beginning it would never last.

So, I know I can cook dinner once a week (as long as she doesn't mind eating cereal for dinner) and fold her clean laundry instead of throwing it on the floor when I pull it out of the dryer. I can volunteer somewhere, and I really think I can refrain from drinking and weed for as long as it takes (although I will probably have to start smoking cigarettes), if it will make her happy. One thing that I will not be doing, however, is attending an AA meeting.

"Fine," I tell her, agreeing to the terms she has transcribed. "But I'm not going to AA."

"Yes, you are," she says.

"Why?"

"Because those are the rules."

"You think I'm an alcoholic?" I ask.

"I'm not negotiating, here. I'm telling you my expectations." Her rising voice and raised eyebrows provisionally convert my anger into restraint.

I feel guilty thinking this but also honest. I love my mother like a boy loves his dog. When I'm home, she's good company. We watch TV together and make fun of her terrible cooking or her terrible boyfriend's kids. We have *Lord of the Rings* marathons, a bag of popcorn in each of our laps, drenched in butter and sprinkled with parmesan cheese, just the way we like it. I'm proud of her shiny hair and youthful body, the way Grandma is of her springer spaniel named Penny. (Although when my friends make rude gestures behind her back suggesting they'd like to fuck her, of course, I have to let known my capacity to fucking kill them). I try to give her the attention I know she desires, otherwise I feel neglectful. But I do not sacrifice my own happiness for hers. I do enjoy spending time with her, but sometimes I get busy. Sometimes I wish she were a dog, so she would only expect love and the occasional bacon flavored treat.

When my mother shows me that list, I begin to miss the days when the only thing expected was that there would never be expectations. The days when she didn't pretend to be a good mother, and when I made her angry, she tied me to chairs. I remember when she was still considered a disappointment for getting pregnant at seventeen. She bagged groceries at Pathmark, and we lived in my grandparents' basement. This was when she forgot about half-days at school and used the microwave to cook all meals requiring heat. She would roll her eyes in obstinate silence when her father asked her what exactly the plan was or when her mother said to me, "You know, she's lucky you're cute." This was before she became a nurse and wore scrubs and spent her days passing out meds and changing diapers at the nursing home, before she had any interest in being an adult or dating older men or unnecessarily curtailing my freedom.

But I can tell you when all this started. It was around the time Mrs. Robinson called to tell her I was failing math. My mother looked down at me like I was the scum of the earth. "You are fourteen," she said. "You have two responsibilities." She held up two fingers. "Two. Be a student and stay out of trouble." Her voice came out high and hoarse, like she was catching a cold from the difficulties I was causing her. I envisioned a scenario in which contagious flesh-eating bacteria were spawned with every wrong move I made, and with every hug or kiss, the disease spread, first to my mother, then over the entire globe.

"You need to pull yourself together," she told me. And it's as though just like that she decided to make it happen. She started asking me where I was going and who I was seeing. She judged my friends, told me what time to come home, and waited up for me. If I weren't smarter than I am, I would think that the call from Mrs. Robinson was the reason. But really, I know it's that fucker Paul.

My mother met Paul at the grocery store. They were standing next to each other, looking at bread. He glanced over at her and said, "You know of any way I can get my kids to eat wheat bread?"

"Good luck with that," said my mother. Later she'd pretend she was offended that he pinned her for a mother, but the way she was going on, it's just as likely she was flattered by the attention.

The next week they ran into each other at the bank. He probably thought it was fate. My mother had to admit he was handsome. "I have to say, he's not so bad to look at," is what she told me. As she said this, I saw her considering the possibilities underneath her thin mask of disdain for this divorcé who tucked in his shirts, shopped for groceries, and *chose* to have two children.

Now, as I look up at her over my bowl of cereal, I think about mentioning that it's possible I might not have gotten so drunk last night if it hadn't been for that dinner with he-who-must-not-be-named. On second thought, though, bringing up my being drunk doesn't seem like a great idea.

He-who-must-not-be-named is what I call Paul to my mother's face. His sons are nine and thirteen. They wear tight clothes, do all their homework, and look like the type of boys who use body wash and brush their hair. Last night they were wearing running shoes with jeans. The three of them came over for dinner and my mother cooked pork chops and mashed potatoes, presumably trying to make it appear like she cooks intricate meals every night. Little did our guests realize, this domestic goddess cannot even open store-bought jars of pasta sauce without my assistance.

Before the dinner my mother told me, "Cooper, I would really appreciate it if you were nice."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "I'm always nice."

She crooked her neck to one side and stared me down. "I mean it," she said. I decided to try my best, seeing as she hadn't been too pleased with me lately.

My mother was opening the oven when they arrived. I offered to answer the door. I pretended I was a butler and told them to come in, bowing a little and gesturing for them to enter the front hall. I even asked if I could take their coats.

I will admit I had preconceived notions about the boys-who-I-do-not-name. Firstly, they are Paul's sons, and more importantly, my mother wishes I was more like them. Paul's ex-wife is "psychotic," in my mother's words. But otherwise, Paul has a perfect little family. And my mother has me. I know Paul brags about his sons—their grades, their interest in science, and their T-ball trophies. She wishes she could say the same about me, but what can she say? Cooper knows *how* to swim? Cooper has friends? Cooper looks good?

My preconceptions about the boys were quickly proven true. What's the point of a high functioning brain if you don't understand the best way to use it? Those boys are gabbling weaklings. One look from Paul, and they knew what to do. I watched Paul tap the older one's arm with his index finger and point at his napkin, and his son unfolded his paper napkin and placed it on his lap. Then, Paul widened his eyes at the other one across the table, flapping his arms like a cranky rooster, and his son happily slid his elbows off the table. The boys chatted away like that dinner was the most fun they'd had all week, and I don't doubt that it was. I finished my dinner in half the amount of time it took everyone else, then sat observing the embarrassing creatures in dumbfounded silence, finding it unbelievable that a group of people could be so boring.

“Adam, you could tell Meg about your science project we’ve been working on,” Paul said to the younger one.

“Well,” he said. “We’re testing how seeds grow with regular water and water that’s heated in the microwave.”

“Fascinating,” I said.

“But actually,” said Adam, “I had the weirdest dream last night. There were the plants like mine in cups of water all over on the ground and there were dinosaurs. It was the time of the dinosaurs and I was alive!”

“Is that right?” said Paul.

“Excuse me, little boy, but do you really think any of us care about your freaky dinosaur dream? I thought they said you’re smart,” I wanted to say. But I kept my mouth shut, impressing myself with my self-control.

“So, Cooper,” said Paul, before realizing his mouth was full. He paused, putting his hand to his mouth and gulping down the partially chewed meat. I could see the clump of it slide down his throat and almost booted right there. “What can you tell us about high school?” He looked at his older son and flicked his chin in my direction, suggesting that he should engage with me on the topic.

I shrugged. “S’alright, I guess.” Looking at Paul’s long nose and short spiky hair across the table as he swallowed food whole was enough; I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of thinking we were friends or ever would be by partaking in a real conversation. “May I be excused?” I asked my mother.

She narrowed her eyes and glared at me for a long moment. She was probably thinking that delaying the response could cause everyone to forget that I’d said anything at all.

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t start,” she said. So, I stayed where I was, avoided any further eye contact, and waited for dessert.

One week later my mother is dropping me off at the Lutheran church for AA. She idles out front as I walk in to ensure that I’m not planning to skip out. Before exiting the car, I say, “Seriously, don’t make me do this.”

“You want to know a secret?” She reaches out and ruffles the tips of my hair with her fingertips. I push her arm away, swatting at my head as if someone just told me it was infested with bugs. This gets me out of the car fast.

When I was little, I had a fire truck shaped bed my grandpa built me. My mother would sit on the edge of it after tucking me in, a tiny boy who still wore striped pajamas. “Do you want to hear a secret?” she’d ask. Every single night I’d shake my head ‘no’ because I knew what she was going to say, and then she’d tell me she loved me, kissing me goodnight and tickling me until I pushed her off.

“Have fun!” my mother calls out the car window, taking wholehearted enjoyment out of my misery. I slam the door and hurry towards the church steps without looking back.

Inside, people smile at me when I sit down. They know I don't belong. I slouch in my seat and stare at my phone while we wait to begin and I don't ever want to look up at their smiling faces. I did research before I got here to ensure that I wouldn't have to speak, and I read that speaking is optional, otherwise there's no way I would have come. I would have waited inside the vestibule until my mother drove away or walked down the aisle and snuck out the back door. We're sitting in a circle, as I had expected, and when it starts, they go around, one by one, introducing themselves and identifying as alcoholics, like it's not obvious. It seems I was misinformed because after the man to my left says his name, all eyes turn to me, and I don't have much of a choice after all. I want to ask, “Isn't this supposed to be anonymous?” Instead, I panic and say, “Hi. I'm Steven, and I'm an alcoholic.”

I stay quiet for the remainder of the meeting, half listening to the others talk about their faith in a higher power. A man named Derek describes waking up every morning for thirteen years disappointed in himself. For the rest of the meeting I try to figure out if it really is possible to be disappointed in one's self or if such disappointment really stems from a fear of disappointing others. I picture myself raising my hand and standing up to say, “*Excuse me, sir! Who is dictating these rules? You or the world?*”

I leave the church feeling pretty smart, like I could take on the universe with my insights. As I walk home, I make a decision; I cannot wait for my mother's rules to become a memory. You only live once. I should have told that to Derek from AA. Yes, things could be worse; I could be an alcoholic. But, right now, I have the power within me to make my life better, and this thought makes me strong. I will help around the house, open all the bottles and jars. I will watch movies with my mother, be home in time for dinner, maybe even attend one of Adam's T-ball games. And next time I'm drunk I will definitely not get caught.