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## **Faculty Brat**

Adolescent silhouettes in the cab of a pick-up truck parked in the weedy space between a gravel road and a cornfield. A common sight for late-night motorists travelling down one strand of the lazy network of back roads that snake out of Peterston, connecting it to the surrounding communities. Those motorists are inclined to smirk knowingly, unless of course, it's eleven o'clock and they don't know where their teenage daughters are.

Right now, distinguished novelist Nathan Walker's teenage daughter has her face buried in the lap of a young man who is reclining in the driver's seat of his stationary '89 Ford Taurus. He shudders slightly and Nathan Walker's daughter sits up. The young man puts his clothes back in order, and starts, with a practiced eye, to roll yet another joint. Nathan Walker's daughter gargles a mouthful of warm High Life, opens the door and spits into the weeds.

"Hey, Shelley, you goin' to the prom?" asks the young man.

Shelley Walker turns away from the dark landscape to see the young man light the joint. The flame briefly illuminates his face with its light sprinkling of acne. She sees his dark eyes, his black hair curling out under his Megadeth hat, and his fledgling mustache. A trace of revulsion interrupts the mellow euphoria of her pot-trance.

"What for?" she says, accepting the proffered joint.

He shrugs. "I don't know. Just wondering." He shifts his position in the seat and looks out the window.

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She softens a little. "Look, Warren, I just don't see the point. I mean, I hate all those people. And, shit, Warren, they all hate you, too. It just seems like an excuse for the jocks and their girlfriends to play dress-up before they get wasted and have sex. You and I can just skip the dress-up, huh?"

Her hand goes to his crotch.

Warren turns, and smiles.

They begin making out, impassioned, but awkward, mouths open so wide it looks as though they are trying to eat their way through to the back of each others' heads

Warren Dixon has spent the last four weeks in a state of grace. He can't get over the fact that he is going out with Shelley Walker. Before Shelley, he had resigned himself to getting it on with flinty skanks like Heidi Gray. Now he finds himself going out with a very pretty girl, and she is even kind of slutty.

Shelley, feeling Warren's hand climb up under her blouse, thinks about what she sees in Warren. He isn't exactly a male model but the faults in his physical appearance are nothing that a Sally Jesse makeover couldn't fix. She shakes up the hazy magic eight ball of her mind and begins putting questions to it. Easy access to drugs? Maybe. His truck? Nah. Shared hatred for high school? Could be. The fact that distinguished novelist Nathan Walker couldn't stand him? All signs point to yes.

Shelley breaks away. "I better get home."

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The door creaks. Shelley pulls her shoes off and makes her way through the dimly lit kitchen. She notes from the microwave clock that it is eleven forty-seven. She has made her school-night curfew.

She walks quietly toward the hallway and nearly collides with Nathan Walker, her father. His thinning hair is poking up in odd places and his shirtsleeves are rolled past the elbow. He squints.

They look at each other quizzically for a moment.

"Hey," says Shelley, her eyes red from marijuana.

"Hi," says Nathan, his eyes red from writing.

They hastily pass each other.

Nathan heads for the refrigerator. Listening to Shelley's footsteps on the staircase, he reaches for the mayonnaise.

He makes himself a sandwich and sits down to eat it. His thoughts turn to his daughter, his only child, and how strained he feels in her company. The lines of communication have been down for a while. He consoles himself: typical teenage unhappiness. She was a smart girl. If he tried to act like her friend, she'd see right through him. She'd grow out of it. He briefly worries: he couldn't think of anything to say to her. That's just because it's late, he thinks, sucking the mayo off the roof of his mouth.

He shuts off the lights and heads up to bed. His wife is sitting in bed reading.

She asks how his novel's going.

He asks how her essay is going.

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They gossip about a few of their colleagues in the English department.

They have a ten-minute conversation about their daughter that demonstrates their command of the terminology. Although they use words like "angst," "youthful rebellion," "necessary phase," "acting out," and "emotional space," the exchange basically boils down to this:

"Do you think we're losing touch with Shelley?" asks Nathan.

"No," says Anne.

"Me neither," says Nathan.

They both agree that she won't shoot up the school. "We taught her better manners than that," says Nathan, deadpan.

They drift into heavy slumber.

Shelley lies on her bed, musing. The lights are on. Billy Corgan wails softly from the stereo. She's still relaxed from the pot, despite running into her father—always a buzz-kill. She casts her eyes around her room. Posters of grunge and Goth bands. On either side of her stereo twin CD racks stand like roman centurions, bulwarks of good taste. Old track ribbons from before she started smoking hang from her desk. Her clarinet serving as a doorstop. Bookshelves lined with the classics of her middle school days—*Lord of the Rings*, the *Wrinkle in Time* Series, *Chronicles of Narnia*. Several more recent acquisitions, gifts or recommendations from her parents—nearly every Virginia Woolf novel, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Annie Proulx, and a bunch of contemporary authors—all unread. One paperback bears a familiar name.

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She gets up and pulls it off the shelf. *Buckets* by Nathan Walker, simple yet elegant font, vermilion sky and wheat depicted on the smooth cover. Thin sheath of dust, but no creases in the binding. Dedication page: "*To the women in my life: Eileen, Anne, and Shelley, my little Muse.*"

She hefts the book thoughtfully for a moment and squints at the wastepaper basket as if she had just paid a dollar at a carnival booth. The book arcs through the air and rests quietly among crumpled notebook paper, candy wrappers and apple cores. Give the girl her prize.

\* \* \*

That same elegant font and vermilion and wheat design had first peeked out from bookstore shelves seven years earlier. That was an exhilarating time for Nathan Walker. He had been hungry for reviews, and they were glittering. "Well, I think I've collected enough blurbs to put on the next one," Nathan remarked at the dinner table as he put the *New Yorker* aside.

"You deserve them," said Anne, who had played no small role in helping him edit the final draft, and who had recently garnered some praise in the academic community for her essay on the modes of perception in Virginia Woolf's novels.

His colleagues at the department slapped him on the back.

Meanwhile, he found himself with a load of free time on his hands. He felt it to be too soon to start the next one. He took a year off from novels to write some short stories, watch six years' worth of movies that he'd missed, and play with his daughter.

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He was on sabbatical for one semester. He would work on short stories in the morning, pick up Shelley from school and take her for ice cream or to the park or to the mall. He cooked every night and read to Shelley every night. Several evenings were spent in serious discussions with Anne about the possibility of having another child. The merry-go-round would turn and he would climb aboard, lie back and stare up at the revolving heavens. "I did it," he would think. Then Shelley would whine. "Daddy, it's stopping." He would get off and dig in his feet to start another running push.

That fall he went back to teaching. A book of short stories went to the publisher. Anne stayed on the pill, and Nathan embarked on his second novel, the one he's still working on.

\* \* \*

One time Shelley showed her parents something she'd written.

Nathan furrowed his brow in mock-seriousness and said, "I think this story shows a lot of promise, but there are some plot problems. Also, this Nina character is especially flat and one-dimensional. I think you need to ask yourself why you wrote this story, and what exactly you are trying to convey to the reader. Also, it's derivative; you need to find your own voice. Rewrite it and have it on my desk by next week."

"Why don't you try to make it more stream-of-conscious?" suggested Anne, with a smile.

Shelley, tears in her eyes, walked away with the pages crushed to her chest.

She was eight, and Nina was a bunny.

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"These young writers just can't take criticism," joked Nathan to his wife.

\* \* \*

Shelley had seen Warren around, but had not known his name until they were in the same English class. Mrs. Gunderson, a humorless middle-aged woman, who had been rumored throw tantrums occasionally, would survey the class over her bifocals, and ask leading questions.

Warren always sat in the back, slouching, his hat on the desk.

One day she called on Warren. "Mr. Dixon, what do you think Orwell was getting at when he chose the name Napoleon?"

Warren straightened up, cleared his throat, considered the question, nodded as he came to a conclusion, and said, "I don't know."

"No ideas at all?"

"No."

"Well, consider his actions in the book."

"I would if I could."

Scattered giggling.

"Am I to take that to mean you haven't done the reading?"

"Yes."

"And why not?"

Warren stolidly met her stern gaze. "Because I hate books."

Right after class, Shelley introduced herself to Warren.

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\* \* \*

And then there was the time Shelley introduced Warren to her father.

"Dad, this is Warren," said Shelley, fighting a bemused smirk.

Nathan put a magazine aside, stood up and gingerly extended his hand.

"Hello, Mr. Walker," Warren was a little uncomfortable. He'd never met Heidi Gray's father; he was in lock-down for too many DWI's.

"So . . ." said Nathan.

"What were you reading, Dad?" said Shelley, knowing the answer.

*"Modern Poetry Journal."*

"Anything good?" asked Warren, tentatively.

"Who's your favorite poet, Warren?" asked Shelley.

"Dave Mustaine," said Warren, without hesitation.

"New guy?" asks Nathan, thinking that maybe that his daughter liked this scabby kid because he was secretly well read.

"No, he's been around for like fifteen years?"

"Huh, I've never heard of him. Is he really underground?"

"No, he's sold millions of albums."

"Albums? What is he, a spoken word guy or something?"

"No, he's the lead singer and guitar player for Megadeth," said Warren, pointing to his hat.

"Oh," said Nathan.



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Shelley kept her face straight, but the glum look her father gave her afforded her a truckload of mirth.

"We'll be upstairs studying," said Shelley, taking Warren by the hand and walking away.

"Okay," said Nathan. He watched them walk away. Warren wasn't carrying any books and wasn't wearing a backpack.

\* \* \*

Before she started seeing Warren, her parents would always talk about Sheldon Cunningham, another faculty brat.

"Why don't you ever do anything with Sheldon anymore?" Anne would ask at dinner.

Her father would regard her closely as she answered.

"We're not really friends anymore," she said.

"Why not? He's such a nice young man, so sharp," Anne would persist.

"We just have different friends now, okay?" Shelley would respond.

Or once in a while she'd come downstairs and her father would say, "You should have come down earlier. Sheldon stopped by to drop off a story for me to read. He's pretty talented. You wanna read it?" He would hold out the manuscript and raise an eyebrow.

"No thanks."

*Jesus Christ, why don't you go out with him?*

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Shelley hated Sheldon. She thought he was a pretentious shit. He always wore a sport jacket over a white button-down shirt. He was arrogant and preppy, and always asked her about her father. "I think he has some kind of repressed homo fascination with my Dad," she once said to Warren.

\* \* \*

Tonight there's light beneath the closed door of Nathan Walker's office in the English Department.. Hushed giggling within. Then low murmuring.

Shelley lies stretched out over her father's desk and Warren rests atop her, breathing hoarsely. Their clothes are in disarray, as are their feelings.

Shelley is the first to break the post-coital silence. Warren hopes she will say something romantic or at least complimentary about their brief coupling.

"You better get some paper towels from the bathroom."

He gets off and stumbles out the door.

Shelley retrieves her bra, which hangs on a bookshelf.

As she refastens it, she looks around the room. The musty cluttered little office triggers early childhood associations. She remembers when her mom and dad took her up to the University. She remembers some elderly professor bending down to squint at her through his spectacles. He looked pleased but a little startled, as though the little girl in front of him were a curious passage in *Canterbury Tales*. "And what do we have here?" She liked being a faculty brat in those days. Everyone she met lavished attention upon her, treated her like she was a breath of fresh air in the stuffy halls of academia. The faculty picnics were

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fun, too. Sheldon standing on the slide, his messy blond hair waving. "My dad's writing a book!" he proclaimed.

"So's mine," said Shelley, coming to her father's defense on her way up the ladder behind him.

A lot of the other children said the same thing.

"My dad's book's gonna be *way* better'n your dad's," said Sheldon.

"Is not!" yelled Shelley.

"Is too!" returned Sheldon. "Your dad stinks."

"Does not!" screamed Shelley, grabbing Sheldon by the leg with intent to bite.

Sheldon pulled his foot back and he went tumbling down the slide.

He cried. The other children bolted.

The parents got the report. Shelley was made to apologize.

Sheldon started coming over and they became best friends for five years. First kiss and everything. But that's all over. Still, you never forget your first.

When Warren comes back, he finds Shelley in jeans and bra sitting behind her father's desk and twirling the key-ring around her finger.

Warren wipes the blood off the desktop.

"I wonder what this other key is for?" says Shelley, looking at the smaller of the two.

She tries it in the desk drawer.

It opens. She pulls out a fat manuscript.

"What's that?" asks Warren, wondering if they're going to do it again.

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"His novel," she says. "Eighteen chapters of it anyway. More than five years of his life. God I hate this thing."

Warren notes her downcast look. He wonders if she's going to cry.

"You know, I could rip this up right now," she says.

"Your dad would be so fucking pissed!" says Warren.

"So what? I don't care."

But she carefully places the manuscript back in its little drawer. She closes it solemnly, as if she were a coroner sliding a pale, toe-tagged corpse back into its meat locker.

"Let's get out of here."

They lock up and leave. She finds a restroom and washes up. They polish off most of a bottle of Jim Beam before he drives her home.

She hops down from the cab. Warren leans over to hear her parting words over his engine. "Bye," she whispers, and heads toward the darkened house.

Warren sits there with the motor running. Then he pulls out of her driveway and takes a hard left. Usually, he's a more careful driver in residential area when he's this drunk, but not tonight. He cranks up a Sepultura CD and makes another sharp turn. The empty cigarette packs and candy wrappers on the dash slide to the right, as does something on the seat.

\* \* \*

Monday rolls around.

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"Where the hell are my office keys!" Nathan shouts, pacing up and down the foyer in his brown suit-coat.

In the kitchen, Shelley nearly chokes on her orange juice. She'd lain around hung-over all day yesterday and had turned in early. She had completely forgotten to put the keys back.

\* \* \*

The affair gets blown out of proportion. The janitor lets Nathan into his office. Nathan gives him permission to break open his desk drawer. He feels nauseous when he sees the space where his novel used to be.

The police show up. Traces of blood are found on the desk.

Nathan yells, and paces, runs his hands through his hair, raves about jealous rivals.

"Blood? What the hell is going on? Has my life become a fucking Miss Marple mystery?"

"Calm down, sir." They manage to get him sitting down.

"When you find the person who did this," says Nathan coldly. "Shoot to kill."

\* \* \*

Meanwhile Shelley finds Warren in the hall at school.

"You didn't find the keys to my dad's office in your truck or something, did you?"

Warren smiles and pulls the keys out of his back pocket.

"Thank God. He was throwing a conniption this morning." She laughs. "Worried about his precious novel, no doubt."

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"He won't have to worry about it anymore," says Warren, proudly.

Shelley stops laughing. "What?"

Warren becomes a little more uncertain. "It's in the river."

"Why is it there?"

Warren lowers his eyes. "I put it there."

"What? Why the hell would you do that?"

"I thought you wanted me to. You said you hated it. Then, when you left the keys in my truck, and I just thought . . . you said you hated it!"

"Yeah, I hate a lot of things. I hate Laurie Winchell too, but I don't expect you to throw her in the river.

"But--"

The last bell rings.

"I gotta get to class Warren. I have to think about this one. I'm in such deep shit because of you."

She hustles off.

Warren shakes his head, then turns and sucker punches an unsuspecting locker.

\* \* \*

When Shelley gets home, her dad is still hysterical. He's on the phone to his agent.

"I know it's weird.

"Yeah.

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"I don't give a rat's ass about the publicity factor, just as long as they find the damn thing and prosecute that A-hole."

Shelley tugs at his shoulder.

"What? I'm on the phone here!"

"It's about the novel."

Nathan turns and gets a good look at her flushed face.

"Yeah, I'll call you back," says Nathan weakly, trembling.

He grimly turns his full attention to his daughter.

\* \* \*

"First of all, you're grounded. Work and school. That's it. Second, I know that this is your own life and you can make your own decisions outside this house, but I never, ever want to see that punk again. If I ever find him in my house, I'm not accountable for my actions." He attempts to lay down the law with dignity and control, but a few sobs break through his speech. "How could you let this happen? I just . . ." His eyes glaze over and drip like leaky spigots. He breaks down and cries on his wife's shoulder.

"Go to your room," says Anne, patting Nathan on the back. "We'll discuss this later." Somebody has to keep order and Nathan is no state to do so.

Shelley goes upstairs. She carries a burden of guilt with her, but also the observation that her dad didn't seem to care too much about her having sex on his desk. Her deeds shrink into insignificance compared to the destruction of his novel.

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Nathan takes some sick days and not altogether dishonestly: that much liquor would make anyone ill.

He sits in his study and nurses a bottle. He doesn't shave. He doesn't shower. He makes no concessions to hygiene. He sits and drinks. He passes out. He wakes up. He cries. He babbles.

Every night his wife tries to console him. She brings him food. She cradles him.

"It's not the end of world, Nathan."

"Yes, it is!" he shouts.

One night she finds him glassy-eyed, swirling bourbon around in a glass.

"Fish," he says slowly.

"What?"

"Fish," says Nathan, undulating his hand in imitation of a fish. "The only ones who'll get a chance to read it."

"You can rewrite it."

"No," he says earnestly. "I can't. Can't recapture it. Impossible."

"Well, you'll just have to write a better one then."

"I s'pose."

"You can't just live the rest of your life in here."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Shelley feels horrible. It's not her fault. She didn't know that creep would do that."

"Yeah, I know."



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"But you haven't forgiven her, have you?"

"Nope."

"Can you try?"

"Yeah. Might take some doing though."

"As long as you try. Do you want to come up to bed?"

He looks around the room, littered with bottles and books.

"Yup." He stands on uneasy feet and Anne supports him as they slowly climb the stairs.

\* \* \*

Fill in the blanks.

"I can't see you anymore, Warren. It's my parents." But it's more than that and they both know it. *She never loved me.*

Warren drops out six months later and gets a job doing construction work.

Sheldon gets a thirty-five on his ACT. He goes off to Princeton. Gives up writing.  
Goes pre-med.

Anne finishes her latest essay and receives the subdued applause of her fellow literary critics.

Nathan gets writer's block. Sees no point. Teaches. Cooks a little.

Shelley saves her money from the coffee shop where she works. She buys a car, quite a steal actually. She dates a little.

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A distance remains between Shelley and her father. He pretends to forgive her, but she detects his concealed scorn in every casual word he says. But he kisses her on the cheek on her graduation day. He and Anne deposit her in a luggage-filled dorm room at the University of Michigan. (*She won't be there anymore. Now I can forget; now I can write again.*)

She makes friends, has a couple serious boyfriends, comes home on breaks, except for the spring ones, which she spends closer to the equator. Decides on the history major, even takes a creative creating class just for a lark.

Nathan starts a new novel.

Nathan aborts his new novel.

That's how things stand.

\* \* \*

A totaled car is turned over in the ditch. Police cars on the road, an ambulance. A common sight for winter motorists in the Midwest as they cruise at reduced speed over the icy roads and drifting snow. The motorists are inclined to crane their necks and thank their lucky stars. Could just as easily be them.

Shelley Walker dead on impact. Junior at University of Michigan coming home for Christmas break.

Funeral, tears, condolences—all as inevitable as death itself.

The police hand over the articles they recovered. Nathan looks through her backpack and finds himself staring at his own name. It's on the cover of a laminated hardback edition

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of *Buckets* from the library at the U. There's a bookmark in it about two-thirds of the way through. This discovery disturbs him more than anything else has so far.

He drives to the bridge overlooking the river, something he has done regularly ever since the lost novel incident. It's snowing in heavy flakes. The wind blusters around him and bullies him. He leans over the railing and stares into the water below. He used to daydream about seeing his novel floating along wholly intact, but today he does not. His novel is gone for good and now he really believes it. Maybe it made some sophisticated bullhead very happy, but Nathan can never reclaim it. It's finished. No chance for revision.

The story of Shelley Walker, including his part in it, is finished as well. No chance for revision.

He looks down at the library copy of *Buckets*, and then launches it into the dark, moving water.

"Also by the same author," he mutters, addressing himself to that imaginary fish.