

## Short Story Segment - *Nat's Dilemma*

There she was again, another Monday afternoon spent spacing out onto the gaps of each boardwalk plank, the wood now swelling in the heat. Nat notes how bloated and jagged they look; the planks trying to fit into the space carved for them when they were thinner. She had the unfortunate luck of landing a part-time job at Silly Willy's Fun Center in this blistering heat, as consequence of getting stuck at her step-dad Lenny's house for the rest of the season. When she heard that she was getting shipped off down the shore for the summer, she was all like, that's sick, I get to be super close to the beach and I'll have such a good tan by the time I get to Binghamton U in the fall.

But, as Nat has come to know quite intimately, Lenny sucks.

Lenny sent out a resume he made for her, without her consent, to every retailer in a 10 mile radius. Not like she would have had a choice, anyways. From what Nat gathered there are two distinct reasons he cited over the 20 minute lecture she received upon her arrival as to why she needed a job; 1) he was not going to have her just sitting around all day and 2) she was to 'learn the value of hard work'. If you only knew the story of Lenny's pathetic life you would totally also think that it was fucking rich for him, of all people, to be saying that. The truth is he had come from the DeSales who owned and operated all of the DeSales Auto Malls across the great state of New Jersey, making him the face of "New or Used" car nepotism. And it's been like this since practically the dawn of humanity, much longer than the coveted 'Pork Roll Egg and Cheese' or even Jenkinson's Pavilion (which is where she is now, watching kids attempt to pop balloons with old darts) if you could believe it. Lenny being from a long line of generational semi-wealth is not an unforeseen event for those of you familiar with the Jersey Shore housing market, it's like disgusting money and generally inaccessible for anyone besides the 1% to even smell the sand, so you could have probably made your own assumptions about him anyways. So while Lenny sits on his weird bony ass watching reruns of *American Pickers* in the air-conditioning, Nat is here counting the splintering wooden planks that separate less-fortunate feet from the paid sand that lies below.

When Nat's mom met Lenny that fateful Spring day, she had been standing in line at Shoprite. It was the Can-Can sale, which honestly I'm not even sure if they run anymore. It was 2008 and Nat's dad had, like, *just* gotten plowed down by that drunk driver, and she's almost positive Lenny could smell the loneliness just rotting and stinking off of Mom's hair, her nails, her teeth. Lenny swept in and next thing

you know they were boning like twice a week after their dates at Lucciano's Ristorante or at home eating Lucky's Chinese, it probably didn't even matter where they went, they just liked each other so much. Mom let him talk over her at dinner. Lenny approached her zebra printed panties with the fervor of a saint. He respected her need for patience by turning her into a small and quiet mouse, ignoring her personhood, instead worshipping her into a sort of religious artifact, and now where her mother once stood was a kaleidoscope of Lenny's dreams, goals, passions, and loud fucking opinions. Lenny felt like a villain so Nat treated him like one. On some small level, she knew her mom needed him to puppeteer her life or else she would clack to the ground and give up completely. It's like that when you lose someone you love. But Nat needed her mom, too. Who was going to keep her dancing? Who was going to puppeteer her life?

Apparently, the answer to that was Lenny. The bell on the winner's alarm sounded, because by a true miracle the dull darts pierced the cheap balloons, and there was a gapped tooth child staring at her, smiling, awaiting his 'Choice' prize.

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## three poems - *fresh birth*

### modern horror

she lifted my skirt with the end of a pencil, creating distance.

my breathing now explicitly shown  
a rise of ribcage as it expands sharply,  
the touch of air and the silver ferrule  
making my bones squirm.

senses heightened, every moment felt exponentially—

the clicking of her heels as she made her way across the tile,  
shaking of the table as i shifted,  
clanging the metal,  
crinkling the drape sheet.

it hasn't been long since i first arrived,  
the air sweet and sterile,  
the lights too bright  
the wallpaper loud  
*as if* i had never seen red before,

as if i had never bled and knew of bleeding–

but i have known red, and i have discovered bleeding.

shortly before this i was a child. crying at the ASPCA commercial, begging my mom for five dollars as the twinkle of the ice cream truck draws near.

what i hadn't quite discovered yet was the benevolence of nature,  
the absolute shit odds chosen for me as i ruminated in my mothers womb.

at its very core, physically, the strife of simply owning the body fertilized XX means a lifetime of pain,  
right from the moment you are brought into this world –

and it's not like hyperbolic and emotional pain, as the poets say–  
but a looping, cyclical pain.

without this pain, life cannot continue. the entire human race would cease.  
the animal world. the plant world.

fertility is essential, and it demands blood.

what a fucking bitch.

this is what i think about at the gynecologist, which is where I am now.  
the OBGYN prods at my junk while i stare off into space.

my clothes laid in a neat pile on the chair in the corner.  
i wonder also if that painting on the wall is a Van Gogh –  
it looks like a Van Gogh.

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### cycling

realizing you within small beaches, the seagulls strain every syllable. there  
was a time where we were the wind racing off the tops of each wave as it crashes, bristles  
gently fingering through every strand of hair. catapulted/taking our time.  
loving ourselves into every bead of sweat.

all you do is cry with the birds of the coast, leaving soon, winter  
approaches like a bullet. i smelt each winding degree as is descended  
into the damp earth, isolating the top soil with each dropping numeral,  
bringing forth the frost we were pregnant with through autumn.

i thought of us as eternal, cycling like we could never  
get tired of peddling. the beach is not always hospitable— natural  
uncaring unbeing. you can choke all you want. the salt seasoned water lapping  
at your sinuses, burning the tender skin that has only known air.

i'm calling to see where you're at.

the dark around the moon is especially so, and i miss the quiet of your eyes.

i always feel the tide's pull in your absence.

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### identifying the problem

i stared at a woman and i saw myself. she was wearing capacious hoop earrings and smelled like hard  
seltzer. she rocked on the bus going from George Street onwards like a passenger to war and i thought to  
myself she must be an otherworldly kind of strong. i felt the churning of her stomach and her mind like it  
was my own stomach and my own mind. i was also afraid she would vomit and i am glad she didn't. i told  
my mother about it on the phone. she asked when i was coming home as if i had said nothing at all and so  
i told her never. i apologized because i was lying and i knew she needed me to come home. anguished, i  
wrote prose poetry and dreamed of wider worlds and longer buses to somewhere where i was older and  
wiser.

when i came home i stared at my father's memorial on the mantle. i felt sorry he died but when he was  
here at least someone would do the laundry. i thought about how much of a necessary task it is and how  
nobody ever remembers how long it takes. 40 minutes is a long time to wait for something to be done. i  
remember on the day he died we were sitting on the couch as three men i had never met before lugged  
him out in a black body bag. me mom and Ian hid under a blanket so we wouldn't see. that moment feels  
like years in my memory. much longer than a load of laundry— flipping around wet clothes until they're  
clean or become dry again.

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