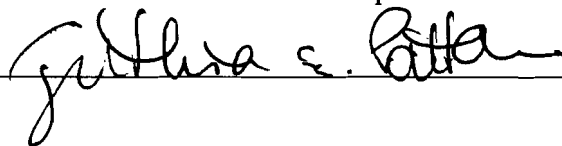


## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Seeta L. Mangra for the Master of Arts in English presented on May 2002

Title: Creative Nonfiction: A Genre of Human Experience

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jitendra S. Patil", is written over a horizontal line.

This thesis is an examination of the genre of creative nonfiction. This collection is designed to provide an introductory experience for new readers of creative nonfiction. The introductory essay attempts to define the genre and its aims. Also discussed in this essay are issues for the author of creative nonfiction to consider such as managing facts and the lack thereof, grasping meaning and significance, accepting responsibility as a writer, welcoming various perspectives, setting journalism and creative nonfiction apart from each other, encouraging acceptance, and promoting empowerment. The three pieces that follow are original examples of creative nonfiction explaining gambling through personal essay, the rise of nerd culture through expository prose, and father-daughter relationships in a travel narrative.

Creative Nonfiction:  
A Genre of Human Experience

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Department of English  
EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

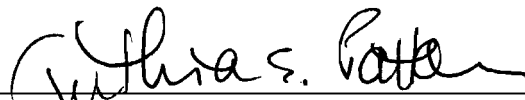
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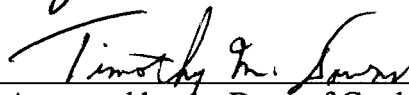
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Seeta Lee Mangra  
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Approved by the Department Chair



Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

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## Chapter One—Creative Nonfiction: A Genre of Human Experience

Creative nonfiction has barely found its footing. A possible reason for this is the difficulty in determining a definition. A simple definition would state that creative nonfiction includes such types of writing as personal essays, memoirs, travel narratives, nature essays, and literary journalism. However, it is not fair to boil the genre down to a few types of writing. The characteristics of the genre deserve a closer look. Creative nonfiction started in vagueness. In his article, Mark Massé talks about the murky waters from which the current incarnation of creative nonfiction began, citing the title “New Journalism” that Tom Wolfe made popular about forty years ago (13). In reality, creative nonfiction has been around much longer. In no way is it new. It has been called narrative nonfiction, narrative journalism, personal writing, and just plain narrative.

Thanks to the work of Lee Gutkind, a man once dubbed the “Godfather of Creative Nonfiction” for coining the term creative nonfiction, the genre finally found a name that seems to fit. Yet putting the words creative and nonfiction together gave rise to many questions. The answer seemed to be that creative nonfiction is writing that is based on actual experience, as told with the conventions of fiction. It is important to define the principles that give creative nonfiction a foundation, such as how the genre deals with fact, how it understands meaning, realizes responsibility to the self and to others, and acknowledges positionality. Also essential to the genre’s foundation is that it is set apart from journalism through objectivity and significance, that it establishes belonging, communicates experience through writing, and empowers the marginalized.

Creative nonfiction is a form of writing that presumes to be based on actual experience, while at the same time challenging the perception of fact. Typically, the author takes on a

persona or becomes a narrator for the piece. Take, for example, Bret Lott's "Brothers," a memoir about his childhood that challenges the idea that facts are static. "This much is fact [. . .]" Lott states at the beginning of his piece (113). His narration starts with a description of watching a home movie of himself as a child sitting at his grandparent's pool with his older brother. The boys' mother is also there. Lott's narration further details the facts of the event such as where his mother is sitting, what she is wearing, his own facial expressions and behaviors, and a detailed description of the events that follow. However, through the narration we are told he does not remember sitting by the pool even though the film is there for him to reminisce. Though Lott does not remember the incident, it is his experience. The piece uses the home video as a convention to tackle the issue of the unreliability of memory and the truth in experience. Most likely, if Lott's brother were asked to relive the tale, the situation would have been described differently, yet what is important here is not the brother's version, but what the experience means to the narrator.

Such a scenario gives the impression that such pieces are unreliable and manipulative because the story of what is supposed to be fact changes from person to person. Yet Lott's story is not unreliable or manipulative because he admits to what he does not know. Approaching his work in this manner makes for a more accurate representation of the facts than if Lott were to "explore the gaps" in his memory and fabricate them to keep his reader's interest (Bartkevicius 227). It is the nature of the creative nonfiction writer to provide readers with a touchstone of experience. What matters more than the simple conveying of fact is what the facts add up to in the creation of meaning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Recently, I wrote a piece about my father. The idea behind the piece came when I was thinking about how boring my life had been thus far. It occurred to me that I really had not done anything worth noting. However, I thought about a time when my dad and I went to a Cubs game in Chicago where we got to see Sammy Sosa hit his historic sixty-first and sixty-second home runs in 1998. Perhaps we just happened to be in the right place at the right time. But as I started to think about what I would type, it occurred to me that most of the seventeen-hour day of the game was a blur. The six-hour trip up was uneventful except for moments of my dad's driving that made me nervous. For me, as much as I love baseball, I can never remember the score, or who did what. The trip back is a euphoric sleepy mess consisting of nothing but memory flashes.

From what I remember, it was a fun day. My father and I certainly had clashed in the past over politics, behaviors, and who knows what else, but this trip allowed us to connect in a way that previously seemed impossible. As I was writing, the essence of the piece began to show itself. It was not up to me to decide what the piece was about; it was up to the piece: "what *it* wants, not what I want" (Hampl 263). And there it was. My story's subject was not about baseball or Sammy Sosa; instead, it was about seeing my father as a generous, fun-loving man. The story humanized my father for me.

I drafted the piece quickly, and when I finished, I felt good about it, thinking that I had gotten all of the necessary and accurate information in there. It was surprising how much I recalled from other games we attended. Some parts of the piece were brutally honest about my feelings toward my father, and that was how I wanted it since even the negative feelings contributed to my understanding of our relationship (my dad turned out to be a pretty good guy in the end). It was not as if I wished to present him in a negative light, but the significance of a creative nonfiction piece should never lie.



Unfortunately, as the day that I wrote the piece went on, I grew less confident about what I was writing. I felt I needed to show my father the piece to make sure he concurred because I was afraid of sounding like I made it up. I did not want to work with the piece anymore. If there was anything that I hated more than feeling awkward around my dad, it was having him, a police officer whose career depends upon fact, tell me that I got the facts all wrong. I knew that he would not want his daughter, the writer, to be seen as a liar. If any of his family read it, and they came to him to ask him about it, I knew he would not want to have to say that it happened differently and later have his daughter seen as a child who never got out of her “let’s play pretend” stage. Getting to the facts was important, but their meaning as I saw them was the purpose of the piece regardless if my work challenged my family’s perceptions.

The piece soon became intimidating for me. I still have not shown it to my dad, though I have spoken with him about it. Though he says he is just happy to have me writing about him, I have struggled with what to do with the piece. After reading Russell Baker’s essay, “Life with Mother,” dealing with the difficulties he faced when writing about his deceased mother and making sure his representation of her was fair, I got angry that Baker did not explain to me what to do with someone who was still alive. These were my fractured memories of that day; it was natural for me to be defensive about them. I tried to utilize Dillard’s suggestions in “To Fashion a Text,” and it just was not working. While writing a piece about her childhood, she was contemplating what to “put in” and “what to leave out” (Dillard 236-41). Her words about sensitivity stuck with me: “I tried to leave out anything that might trouble my family” (Dillard 242).

For me, anytime I wrote about my family, I knew I was going to face the fear of what they would think if they read it. Now, it was the responsible thing to do. It was important to be

fair to my dad and let him give me some feedback. Yet, there was no avoiding it. I knew exactly what he would not like. Precisely, it would be anything that was considered strictly family information or anything that was not particularly flattering. Yet I wanted to follow what creative nonfiction writer Peter M. Ives said about one of his own pieces in “The Whole Truth,” “I write about my father because there is no one else to write about him. Because he was real and vital and glowed. Because I loved him” (Ives 276). On the surface, I chose to write about my father because he is my father, because I have learned from my father’s teachings and from his mistakes. I wanted to tell about his life as a police officer, as a strict, protective father, and as a man who had to work at becoming a good husband. My father, as one of my greatest sources of life education, offers me a wealth of stories to share about him and what he means to me.

It became clear to me that if I wanted to be a serious creative nonfiction writer, I had to take a stand. It was my decision, as it is any writer’s decision, what to include and what to do away with. These were my experiences, and I tried to be as fair as possible. But I am limited by the subjectivity of my own experience (as most writers are); therefore, there is going to be some disagreement between me and my father as to what is fair and what is simply airing dirty laundry. The influence of a writer’s family can be overwhelming. This does not mean that a creative nonfiction writer can simply write what she pleases about anyone. Dillard is right when she says, “I don’t believe in a writer’s kicking around people who don’t have access to a printing press. They can’t defend themselves” (242). I chose to include my family’s flaws while defending them at the same time. It was only fair to be honest about them because it was the honesty of the experiences that compelled me to write about them. What I write is who they are to me. They are human beings, and not only is it the meaning of the piece that I hope will help

the people who read it, but it is also who the members my family comes across as that will hopefully shed new light on issues that I don't touch on directly.

Beyond what to edit and what to add, deciding what is true and what is not true is a delicate decision that the author must make. Authors must make it clear that what is conveyed as truth or fact in their stories is merely one account of what occurred. This can be done by acknowledging one's positionality or one's position as an individual with individual memories.

\* \* \* \* \*

Creative nonfiction and journalism have many similarities. Both are based in fact. Depending on the approach, a creative nonfiction article can follow a similar structure as a journalistic piece. It would be wrong to dismiss creative nonfiction as having roots in journalism. But journalism it is not. One of the first things taught in an introductory journalism class is how to disappear from the text. For the most part, the author should not, on the surface, play a role in the events portrayed of the article. Generally speaking, most of journalism maintains a belief in fact. Journalism as reporting is about fairness and seeing things from the sidelines without presenting bias. Successful journalism tells the facts of other people's lives and tends not to moralize.

As journalism upholds the principles behind objectivity, creative nonfiction moves beyond objectivity by embracing significance from the individual's standpoint. This allows the author to speak from the first person point of view. Speaking from personal experience and acknowledging one's biases provides the uniqueness that journalism must avoid. The creative nonfiction author not only concedes to being biased, but the writer also understands the value of her predisposition by emphasizing the issue of individuality. As Lee Gutkind puts it, "Good creative nonfiction does not deny personal opinion; on the contrary, it welcomes the subjective

voice” (Gutkind). It is not the job of the creative nonfiction writer to report facts; instead, it is a matter of recalling them as intact as possible.

Like journalism, however, the concern over whether something actually happened is not entirely irrelevant. Creative nonfiction writers must maintain fidelity to what they remember as actually occurring. Their memories are individualized interpretations of fact. When the writer decides that memory has failed, the shared experience of Patricia Hampl can be sought. “I am forced to admit that memoir is not a matter of transcription, that memory itself is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a static gallery of framed pictures. I must admit that I invented. But why?” Hampl goes on to explain many reasons why, but the key point is “I don’t write about what I know; I write in order to find out what I know” (Hampl 262). It is not the forgotten and compromised details that count, it is the purpose and the meaning that are important.

Additionally, the creative nonfiction writer that fabricates entire tales to elicit responses from readers either for personal pleasure or commercial gain is playing a game of manipulation that could be considered unethical. In other words, a creative nonfiction author who attempts to pass off fiction as truth could be seen as unfairly manipulating the reader and the art. The power of the human experience has shaped humanity and will continue to shape it for as long as the human experience is allowed to be shared. Ives states in his “The Whole Truth” “[. . .] any story [. . .] must have a basis in reality. That is, what we read—whether fiction or nonfiction—must in some way correlate to our experience, to our sense of what is real” (273). Through creative nonfiction writing, people can identify elements of themselves within other people. As Phillip Lopate says in the introduction to his book, *Portrait of My Body*, “we are all ignorant when it comes to knowing ourselves” (3).

What is at stake in a piece is not truth, but human understanding. Creative nonfiction writing has the ability to make readers feel as if they are valued. The excerpt from Phillip Lopate's *Portrait of My Body* found in *The Fourth Genre* is a prime example of defining this ability to help others feel comfortable with their own doubts. Lopate admits to his self-consciousness, his thought processes, his shortcomings, and his pride. He even admits, "I also pick my nose with formidable thoroughness when no one, I hope, is looking" (Lopate 110). While it is unclear the number of people who pick their noses while heads are turned, Lopate has hit on something significant. He knows that the human body and humanity's feelings toward it remain relatively undiscussed. He also has probably wondered if other people do the same things that he does when they are alone. Lopate illustrates the importance of the personal essay's role in the acceptance of ourselves as we are.

This allows readers of creative nonfiction to say, "I can relate to that." It is precisely Lopate's human experience that keeps us reading. It is the fact that readers can learn that the suicidal thoughts we might have had during rough points in our lives aren't crazy, or that finding pride in certain parts of our bodies, like the pride Lopate has of his hands, puts creative nonfiction on bestsellers' lists. In tales told by the creative nonfiction author, we can see ourselves. We can take that with which we identify and come away from that piece, not with an answer to the meaning of life, but to a better understanding of what we can do with life.

\* \* \* \* \*

The paradox of creative nonfiction is that while it deconstructs normalcy by permitting individuals to communicate their views, it creates a sense of belonging. In Patricia Hampl's "Memory and Imagination," where she examines the writing process she undertook for her creative nonfiction tale, "Parish Streets," she develops this sense of belonging. She reflects on

her childhood days in a neighborhood that provided her with the discovery of life through other human beings. One of her most telling moments is when she is faced with the dreadful Mary Katherine Reilly at her Catholic school piano lessons. She explains how Mary Katherine's piano playing skills were "more sophisticated" and that Patricia remembers when Mary Katherine "sized me up" (Hampl 260). From there, Mary Katherine makes it clear that she will be the leader of their friendship, not Patricia. Then Hampl says, "I nodded, I acquiesced, I was hers" (260). Hampl remembers fearing Mary Katherine from their first meeting, but she is taken in by the older girl. Mary Katherine becomes the figure that accepts Hampl and offers her a place to belong. Even though it is as Mary Katherine's subordinate, the approval is nonetheless apparent.

This sense of belonging is at the center of my "Nerd Culture" piece. To be a nerd in many a childhood meant exclusion. However, nerds have found their own definition of what it means to belong. Belonging for nerds doesn't necessarily mean acceptance into popular cliques anymore. Instead, it means acceptance of oneself and recognizing a sense of belonging among other nerds. But more than that, the message that I wanted to convey in my "Nerd Culture" piece was that even though nerds are in the midst of what seems to be a nerd empowerment movement, everyone must be aware that harm that comes about when we don't accept one another based on appearances and tastes. Many don't understand the frustration that comes about during the awkward teenage years of simply being denied belonging by those who are valued as "cool" or "beautiful;" for this reason, I mentioned the tragedy in Littleton, Colorado. I wanted to dismantle the idea of "normal" among teenagers and young adults in order to encourage individuality, no matter what labels are generated from that individuality. Another important message is that though we do not necessarily have to pay heed to a social standard of normal appearance as we

are growing up, we all do have similar feelings. In other words, another theme in my “Nerd Culture” piece is de-emphasizing “normal” appearances and emphasizing normal feelings.

\* \* \* \* \*

Much too often, our ids bait us into thinking no one knows what we go through.

Everything we feel is foreign to everyone else. Those who suffer depression or self-esteem issues face daily that they are utterly alone in the world. What creative nonfiction is doing is joining the ranks of other genres such as fiction by showing others that the human experience, the sense of belonging spoken of before, can be shared through writing. Writing is about a number of different things, but a common goal most writers of many genres have for themselves is to contribute to a better understanding of life. The creative nonfiction piece is an extension of that conversation. It contributes to a more open communication between humans, to the intellectualization of our thought processes, and to our everyday experiences.

Furthermore, the possibilities of learning from one another through writing can offer a new forum of empowerment to those previously unable to communicate with the rest of society. Specifically, marginalized groups who have been silenced and shunned in the past, or who have felt uncomfortable communicating through established genres like poetry or fiction, now have an additional way to speak to those who can identify with them, as well as those who are ignorant about them. Creative nonfiction offers those marginalized groups a fresh chance to write directly from their own voices. For example, bell hooks claimed her creative work was not published because it did “not conform to the type of writing they [publishers] think black women should be doing or the type of writing they believe will sell” (2483). Now, hooks is a well-known writer. Homosexual men and women have a genre to share their stories, so they can help those who find themselves struggling with the idea of being gay feel comfortable and safe.

I find myself in many different marginalized groups, and creative nonfiction provides me with a chance to express my life experiences. It is not everyday that a half black, half East Indian, short, fat, Agnostic woman is given a forum to speak her life. So, in a sense, I write simply to offer a different view on life. However, the influences in my life are often based in marginalized groups. My father is often the center of my work because he overcame the odds. He is an immigrant and a minority at his work. Most of us in society have grown used to seeing minorities on the wrong side of the handcuffs; my father is a minority on the more fortunate side. My mother is black, and she has managed to continue in a marriage with a husband who was unfaithful. Her stories of being one of the few women who fought infidelity in her marriage and won by insisting that the marriage work out no matter what are uplifting to those women, not just minority women, who might find themselves in the same position. I can admit to being a nerd, but more importantly, my boyfriend is the biggest nerd I know. He does not see this as an insult, and that was so intriguing to me that I wondered if nerds had ever been told that it doesn't always have to be an insult to be a nerd. He was my inspiration for the "Nerd Culture" piece.

The point behind examining the marginalized status of the focus of my pieces is to show that these are the types of people about which stories are not written. Most cases of marital infidelity cause marriages to end. Most women, from what we hear, do not stand up and fight for their marriage. In addition to this, there are few narratives of minority men who want to work for law enforcement. Watching *COPS* for an hour usually does not provide viewers with a positive perception of minorities, and even when the police officer is a minority, they find themselves arresting other minorities. Finally, most nerds do not stand up and say, "I am a nerd!" Instead, many nerds simply try to ignore being told that they are ugly, uncool, and unwanted. The majority of nerds either live their lives trying to be a part of a group that does not want them, or



they shun society's expectations of them and go through life as practically invisible. These are stories that have not been told. They also happen to be stories that should be told to give the traditionally marginalized a chance to identify and belong.

Creative nonfiction has allowed me an opportunity to identify with others, as fellow readers of the genre might also find to be true. While writing "Slot Machine Marriage," I grew to better understand how my family operates and I identified how the conflicts we experienced as a family shaped us into who we are. "Slot Machine Marriage" was the most difficult piece to write personally, as well as the most enlightening about the surroundings in which I was raised. "Nerd Culture" was undertaken partially as an examination of the under acknowledged, partially as a means to challenge my creative nonfiction writing skills. As the piece is not from the first person perspective, I was provided the opportunity to explore the journalistic side of creative nonfiction. Finally, "The Bleachers" allowed me to understand my perceptions of my father through my memories and to learn about him and our relationship. While "Slot Machine Marriage" may have been helpful in learning about my whole family and my role in my family, "The Bleachers" presented me with an opportunity to value the relationship between my father and I, which is one that has always been a little strained.

The potential for the creative nonfiction's growth is strong. As long as newscasts thrive on human-interest segments, and varying cultures desire to hear stories of triumph and success, creative nonfiction's future does not appear to face any problems. One can easily speculate that if there are human experiences to be shared, creative nonfiction can continue to grow as a viable and meaningful genre.

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## Chapter Two—Slot Machine Marriage

Everyone I knew was convinced my parents had a gambling problem. And maybe more when my mom, a humble school bus driver, won her motorcycle. There she sat on this mass of steel, bright showcase lights glinting off her silverish hair, the very hair we had made fun of for its indistinguishable color—a rainbow of silver, white, blond, black, copper and who knows what else—the lights putting her at the center of attention. This was a place to which she was not accustomed. After catching a moment of my mother’s “I can’t help it” grin, patrons moving from slot machine to bathroom to slot machine paused long enough to enviously gaze at her and smile. People with raspy, smoke-damaged, casino voices barked out, “Congratulations, Connie!” My sisters and I rolled our eyes at my mom’s frightening popularity. Prairie Meadows Racetrack and Casino was my parents’ version of *Cheers*, even down to a handful of guys you could swear were incarnations of Norm with the way their butts were cemented to the stools for hours at a time. The track photographer, whom I had grown up talking to on a nightly basis at the horse races, walked up to take the winner’s picture for the *Winner’s Circle Newsletter*. “Your mom won this?” His shock was laughable as he saw me standing there with my father and two older sisters.

In the only house I’d ever known until I moved away, there would regularly be buckets of nickels or quarters sitting on the dining room table or on my mother’s desk. Both pieces of furniture had fallen victim to one of the episodes in which my father got so angry over something that he lost control. The dining room table never really recovered from being slammed with a hammer; a whole side was splintered all the way across.

In calmer times, my father would hide extra hundreds behind the framed pictures of his children sitting on his desk, or under the sunflower table cloth that had been on the dining room

table for at least five years, the table cloth that performed double duty by covering up the round, hammer head divots in the table's top. Although I never saw him take the money out, I was convinced he'd stashed money in the ten-year-old Velcro black tennis shoes that were collecting dust at the side of the bed in my parents' bedroom.

On occasion, my sisters and I would walk in to the light blue living room (we called it the front room because it faced the street with a tall, double-paned glass window) at just the right moment and suddenly find ourselves anywhere from ten to one hundred dollars richer. Yet I felt bad because even when he wasn't handing over the money out of generosity, my sisters and I knew that we could take advantage of him when he was watching the horse races on television. He would be sitting in his chair, intensely focused on the TV. It was easier than it ever should have been to get money from him, which made the situation even worse considering the arguments my parents would have about money, about how my dad never contributed to the bills. Listening through the always closed door of my bedroom, I would hide the crisp hundred dollar bills I would get, just like my father, hoping my mother wouldn't find out.

Even after my two older sisters had moved away from home, they would still come over and hint to dad that they needed cash (I was not above this, I must admit). And my dad was rarely at a loss to hand it out to us. He always made it clear with his stern voice, a voice that was surprising for a man of his size, that none of his daughters would ever suffer . . . unless we brought it on ourselves. I distinctly remember being shocked one day talking to him about what would happen if one of us were put in jail. He looked at me, tough as ever with his dark brown East Indian/South American sunned skin, his black mustache full and neatly trimmed over his top lip, his black hair growing a little thinner everyday on the top and a little more silver at the sides. His face was sharp. Making it very clear that he earned that title of police officer, he let it

be known that if we got thrown in jail, we probably deserved it, and we'd have to find our own way out.

Whenever he said things like that, I knew I wasn't dealing with the father side of him. It was the officer side, the side he had perfected after a rough time at the academy because of the height requirements. Being a little shorter than the other guys, Dad had to maintain a hard-ass attitude. I'd grown indifferent to it by the time I graduated from high school due to the number of classmates that asked me if my dad was a cop. When I responded positively, they would say, "He's an asshole. He stopped me this weekend for . . ." and the various reasons ranging from drugs to speeding to drunk driving would come. I knew he was an asshole at work. That was the point. Right before I graduated from high school, a girl I knew told me the same thing, and I simply looked at her and said, "He's only an asshole to people that deserve it." I knew that was true of him on the job, but not always at home.

Thanks to the "allowances" my dad gave us, the eldest sister of us three inevitably spent her "allowance" on Beanie Babies, the middle sister would disappear with her husband for hours on Saturday mornings as they went garage sale-ing, and I would manage to blow it either playing pool at the Plaza Lanes Bowling Alley on the side of town that was on the edge of scary, or at T.G.I. Fridays where my friends knew they could always get a free meal out of me. That was one of the first things I noticed about my parents and the lessons they taught us girls. They knew a lot about spending money, but absolutely nothing about saving it. This problem followed us into our respective relationships with the men in our lives and each other. I never hesitate to remind my sister about the \$250 I lent her after she got one of the bills from her honeymoon. Or about the interest that was collecting on my maxed out MasterCard because of it. I never blamed her for

my card being maxed; I did that on my own. But reminding her to pay up, there was never a chance I missed to do it. Needless to say, I never saw the money.

Saving money, however, was never a big deal to my parents considering their luck with gambling. It was the other lesson about money that my sisters and I hoped to pick up on through heredity. I remember walking in to the cashier's office at the beginning of my sophomore year at the local community college, just to find out that my entire semester was mysteriously paid off. Most of the semesters at the college cost about \$800, but this semester was my most expensive since I was enrolled in fifteen credit hours. My bill was somewhere in the \$1,000 range. I ran upstairs to my sister's office to ask if she knew where the money went. There were some perks and some major disadvantages to having both my middle sister and her husband work at the college I attended. While I basically got my way with registration since my brother-in-law was the registrar, I had to remember never to miss a test because my sister was the person who administered make-up tests. Any news about me got around quickly because everybody that worked there knew who I was.

I walked in to my sister's second floor office, and without pausing to say hello, I asked her who had paid for my classes. She seemed to cringe at my lack of tact in waiting for her to stop talking to whoever it was she was talking to. Never really giving in to my spoiled, youngest child ways, she finished what she was doing and then looked at me a little annoyed. "I can't tell you," she said half irritated, half amused. I think she liked the fact that her dorky little sister could come in, bug her at work, and not get in trouble for it. It gave her a chance to take out those frustrations of dealing with impatient students and instructors by calling me either a dork or a nerd or a geek. But I could tell this time she was irritated by exactly what I was asking her about and not about the people she worked with.

After grilling her for a week, she finally told me that my mother had won a jackpot on the slot machines at the track. Mom didn't tell anyone that she had won and secretly paid off my semester. My sister was never one to miss a chance to make money (and is still pretty crafty about it), so I asked her what she got out of it to keep it a secret from everyone. The dollar amount escapes me now, but I'm sure it had to have been around one hundred bucks.

"Don't tell your older sister," my middle sister said to me seriously. The oldest was also the greediest, and since I was the only one who'd had any of my college paid for by my parents, her wrath was something I did not want. That was the one thing she had gotten from my father that I did not envy. She'd managed to be the skinny one by inheriting my father's metabolism, and she was beautiful with her dark skin and thin waist. The oldest frustrated my middle sister and I on her wedding day, when we admired her in her size zero wedding gown. Neither of us enjoyed getting my mother's weight and roundness, but at least we had the cooler heads of the three.

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My mother was no stranger to gambling. I'm not entirely sure when my dad got interested in horse racing. I don't even know if they have it where he's from, but I know that he's been interested in it long enough that I knew no beginning to it. And my mother did, from time to time, put a few dollars on a race. She was familiar with the lingo and the rules. But she never did very well on the races. I supposed I assumed that she liked gambling, but just wasn't very good at it. That's why I'm convinced it was when she went to Las Vegas for the first time in her life that she came to adore playing the slots.

On a rare vacation without her husband and children, my mom went out to San Diego with her own mother, her older sister, and her little brother to visit her other brother one year. On

the trip back, they stopped in Las Vegas. Even though my grandmother no longer gambles, at that time, she loved playing bingo. And my aunt didn't mind stopping either. She loved games in general, and if it meant a chance to win money, it wasn't as if she was going to turn down the opportunity.

When they returned from the trip, all my mother could do was rave about how incredible Las Vegas was. She brought out the pictures and showed us Caesar's Palace, Excalibur, Glitter Gulch, and explained all the details that went along with it. She had been bitten by the casino bug, but she was stuck with a new infatuation and had nothing to help get it out of her system. Being in the middle of Iowa was not terribly conducive to slot machine gambling fetishes.

My father was (and still is) a handicapper. He's one of those guys that can be seen at the race track two hours before the races even start, chewing on this red Bic pen, his knees bouncing continuously to the tune of the nervous tic he passed on to all three of us girls. Because of his love for horse racing, I knew that the area where they prepped horses was called the paddock and that whenever we were on a road trip to Chicago, if there was a brown highway sign that read OTB, I didn't have to think twice that my dad was going to stop for some off-track betting (secretly, I damned the person who ever had the idea because even though I liked horse racing, I hated the smoky, wrinkly old men who never left the run down track in the 'burbs of Chicago and who leered just a little too long at my sisters and me). I didn't realize how ingrained horse racing was into my life until my parents took out the eight millimeter home videos that showed me as a toddler on my mom's shoulders, bouncing up and down, clapping my hands as the horses went by.

My dad was much better off when it came to gambling accessibility. When the state of Iowa decided it was time to put in a racetrack to compete with Illinois and Nebraska, my father



was elated. He may have made fun of the name, Prairie Meadows (to this day he calls it Prairie Muffins), and called the horses “nags,” but he still went out there every night.

For years, the track lost money to bigger tracks near Chicago. We were only six hours away from the world-renowned Arlington International Race Course, which seemed light years ahead of the “The Meadows.” Arlington was downright posh. The suburb around it, Arlington Heights, is in the middle of the famed Northwest Suburbs of Chicago, an area that has gained a reputation for being rich and sumptuous. The racetrack was no different. A plain hamburger would cost around six dollars, but before you even got a chance to look at the prices, you would have to walk past the gold painted railings, the stark white walls covered with greenery. The owner of the track, Richard Duchossois (pronounced, much to my surprise, Dutch-ih-swah), would fly in during the races in his helicopter and land just to the right of the first turn of the track. The infield of Arlington had beautiful fountains that sat in the middle of a large pond with ducks and geese swimming around carefree. Prairie Meadows was lucky to get a pond when some rainwater started pooling in the infield.

Arlington, a track that was similar to Prairie Meadows before Arlington burned to the ground, was rebuilt to look like the pinnacle of the rich man’s racing experience. It even outdid Churchill Downs in terms of style. And we were lucky enough to feel like a part of the rich crowd every year around the end of August for the annual Arlington Million race that we’d never missed in the entire existence of the race. We even made it to the Million that was held in Canada the year they were rebuilding the track.

Prairie Meadows had its work cut out for it. And it needed to do something to gain the interest of the Iowans that were going elsewhere to do their gambling. It was all The Meadows could do not to put in slot machines. Some of the residents of the currently up and coming east

side suburb of Des Moines named Altoona fought it. The anti-gambling, conservative groups came out in droves, but in the end, Prairie Meadows promised that they would revitalize Altoona. And they agreed to give a portion of their money to the schools. It was then that I lost both of my parents to the racetrack.

At first, I wasn't sure what to think about it. I'd never seen my parents do anything together that didn't involve the whole family. We all went on vacations together, and even then, they couldn't get along. They would fight about traffic, driving, directions, hotels, reservations, and most definitely, money . . . it was a wonder we didn't get lost more often. One consistent argument they had was how to get to Wrigley Field. It was bad enough that my dad's driving made us all very nervous. He seemed to stop too late, drive too fast, and yell too much. Chicago's traffic magnified all of those problems. So, here the five of us would be, more than likely in the van my parents had bought just for vacations, and the farther into downtown Chicago we got, the more tense the situation would get.

Growing up going to Chicago every year can have a profound effect on a young kid. The fear of the insane traffic lost its hold on me; the fear for the pedestrians that dared step in front of my father's driving path, however, didn't. Yet I was a die-hard Cubs fan and from watching the games on television, I not only knew the names of every street that surrounded Wrigley, but I also knew the buildings around it. I knew how to get to the stadium. And I would sit in the far back seat that was designated the seat for the youngest child, and listen to my parents argue over how to get there, knowing which way was the right way to go.

Every year, we got lost. Mom would say that all you had to do was follow the signs, which she did when she was driving. Dad would yell and say to just get on Lake Shore Drive, go north and get off at Fullerton. And when he drove, that's what he did. So, no matter who was

driving, the other insisted that the driver was going the wrong way. They were both right about being wrong.

For the most part, their arguments on vacation were harmless. But it always started at the same time on every trip. My father was a real stickler for time. He wanted everyone up and ready to go by five in the morning when we went to Chicago. Getting four tired, cranky women out of bed and in and out of the bathroom in a fast manner was impossible. My father would be ready to go in half an hour, and I was more than likely still in bed. But he would sit in the living room and handicap for the horse races that we would inevitably hit later in the vacation.

By six in the morning, if we weren't on the road, he would start pacing. Then he would start getting snippy with us to load up the van, and "Let's go, let's go, let's go!" By the time we all finally got packed up in the van, he'd already gotten pissed off at my mother for taking too long to do whatever it was that she was doing.

"What's taking your mother so long?" He would ask us.

"She said she was getting her coffee, and needed to go to the bathroom," one of us would tell him only to hear him sigh frustratedly and suck his teeth every thirty seconds. If enough time went by, he would raise his voice at the steering wheel and say, "Jesus, woman, what's taking you so damn long?" To make sure she heard him, when she did make it to the van, he would ask the same question again, ensuring that the trip would start with the tension that we apparently could not do without.

Only once in a great while did my parents have blowouts on vacation. They reserved the blowouts for the privacy of their own home. That's how the hammer got planted into the table, the desk, and the wall. That's how my parents wrestled in the kitchen in the middle of an

argument. That's how I woke up to hear my parents yelling at three in the morning about my father's infidelity.

It was a shock when they started getting along long enough to go to The Meadows together. They began spending every weekend out there, and even some weekdays. Sometimes when they came home, they would even laugh and joke about the fun they'd had at the track. My mom would tell stories about someone she knew from work winning a jackpot. Dad would then counter with a story about one of his buddies from the track that had won four hundred quarters on a Double Diamond machine that Dad had just gotten up from. When my mom started calculating how much 1,750 nickels was in dollars in her head, and my dad started treating my mom as his equal, I even began to think they had gambling problems. It disturbed me to see that it took spending money to bring them together. Yet it wasn't until the motorcycle that I began to understand that it was indeed that casino and not necessarily the money that would bring them together after nearly thirty years of fighting.

As my mom proudly sat on her new prize, the \$38,000 pearl white and snakeskin green Titan (the green flares on the sides were made of real snakeskin that was painted emerald green), it wasn't that people were asking about the bike and how much it was worth. Instead, they were asking if she knew how to ride it. My mother, endlessly modest but subtly savvy when need be, would just continue to smile and say in her rarely rattled content manner, "Of course."

She won the motorcycle a couple of years after she had started gambling at Prairie Meadows, so her fortune didn't surprise me too much. I'd been a little desensitized to hearing about how much she was bringing home. I was never displeased, just ambivalent (I guess I wished I could win that much on the measly ten bucks I'd drop here and there at the track).

When she told me that she'd won it, I thought to myself, "This was bound to happen eventually." But I was never more thrilled for her than when I found out she had finally hit something huge.

What did surprise me was my father. He stared at what was going on around him in his stomping grounds. His expression was a glazed-over sort of smile, his eyes darted around bewildered by the congratulations that were coming from every direction around him but weren't necessarily directed at him. The patrons at the track had come to know him by name a long time ago, not his wife. Yet here he stood, the woman he'd cheated on for the bulk of my life, the same woman who was tough enough to restore a 1957 Chevy and who happily did all of the yard work, the woman he'd never put in the center of his attention . . . here she was stopping the show. His track buddy, an old man with a penchant for swearing at just the right time, walked up and said, "Did you win this damn thing, Ram?" My father, in a maneuver that caused my sisters and I to look at each other in disbelief, shook his hands in front of him and quickly answered, "No! No! My wife won it. Not me."

The huge family that my father was born into was from Guyana. There were nine boys and four girls. My grandmother originally had seventeen children, but living in a third world country isn't kind to human life. Humility was something my father had not learned. His father, a man that was well known in his country but died before I could remember him, was a stern man. Old fashioned and tough, there was no doubt about who was in charge of the household. I don't want to dishonor my late grandfather by saying he was a womanizer because I, in fact, do not know if he was. However, it was clear that his wife was there for baby-making.

So, my dad and his brothers had to pick it up somewhere. Extra-martial affairs were not uncommon, and the behavior followed the family over to the States. All but two of the brothers (as I was told) had cheated on their wives; my father's affair seemed the most appalling. Not

only had he cheated on my mom with one of the rudest women I'd ever encountered, but he continued to do so and father two of her three children. When he was no longer "financially responsible" for us (a month after I turned eighteen), my dad left to live on his own so that he could take care of his other family. Nightly, I could hear my mother's sobs through the wall between my bedroom and hers.

All through middle school and high school, I begged my mother to leave my father. But she sat on the couch each night accompanied by the daily tapes of her holy trinity: *The Young and the Restless*, *As the World Turns*, and *Guiding Light*. My father worked the two to ten p.m. shift and would always come home after my mother, who went to work at the bus garage at five in the morning, was long asleep. He would disappear on many of his days off, occasionally declaring he was going to Chicago or Florida for a few days. It never occurred to me until it was recently laid out for me that he was going to the same places, horse tracks and baseball stadiums, with his other family. When I asked my mom why she didn't get a divorce, she looked at me, her eyes focused on me intently as if she were trying to exercise her hate and pain, and she would quietly say, "I worked for this marriage, he's not getting out so easily."

My father was gone for a year. While my mother would sit in her bedroom with the door closed night after night, the times when I saw my father were tense and awkward. I didn't want anything to do with him. I hated having to hear my mother cry every night, and each time I saw my father, I blamed him for the pain I faced at home. So much went on in that year that most of it remains unknown to me. It was such a strange procession of events that it's hard to grasp now, but it started with my father staying with his mistress, then moving into an apartment close to our house and having his other family come there. While he was living at his new apartment, there was one fight that I finally let it all out. The events that led up to it are blurry, but I know I was

watching my mother yell at my father over our patio. She stood in the patio door while he stood in the driveway, and I paced behind my mother in the dining room. In a rush, I remember my father charging up to the patio, and I went for him. My mother pushed me back as I screamed, “Fuck you! Fuck you!” over and over again at him. Eventually, my mother shoved me back hard until I knocked over a chair and fell on the floor. My mother apologized to me repeatedly while trying to get my father to just leave us alone. That may have been the breaking point for him. I know that he was shocked. I’d never spoken to him that way; I never even dared. Nor would I ever do it again. I could tell it in his face and voice that he was broken-hearted by my words; “Listen to our little daughter,” he yelled, blaming my mother for turning me into a foul-mouthed, disrespectful daughter.

It is completely beyond me how they started being civil again. One day, it seemed as if my mother was spending a great deal of time over at my father’s apartment. Then she started spending the night there. My dad, still determined to raise his other family away from the home he’d raised us in, ended up buying a house. That’s when I stopped seeing my mom at home. Within a few weeks of purchasing his new home, my mother was living with him. My oldest sister and brother-in-law, who had moved in to the basement at some point during the year, were now running our house, and I was a wreck. Beyond my sister’s similarities to my father that I disliked, I just wanted my mom to come home.

If it wasn’t my mother’s insistence to keep her husband in her life, or my unfettered rage toward him, it was his own mistress that caused him to come to his senses. During the first six months of my dad’s “sabbatical” from us, his mistress (“the woman” as she was known around the house, her name was not to be spoken) was pressuring my dad to divorce my mom and marry her instead. When he said no and moved in to his apartment, her true colors burst out from the

sugar-coated exterior she always had around my dad. She started demanding child support and turned his own children against him, refusing to let him see them. When my father and mother started to patch things up, my father profusely apologized to my mom for how he had treated her.

Eventually, my sister and brother-in-law moved in to the other house my father bought, and thankfully, both of my parents returned home. Yet there was more tension in that house than there had ever been. The tension, however, was preferable to his violent outbursts that, in the past, had caused my father to toss every drawer of my mother's clothes into the yard. If there was anything that he wasn't anymore, it was violent. Any time he started to head that direction, my mother, finally standing up for herself, said she would have no more of it. I think, on top of my mom's newfound strength, he had grown to see that he was being run over by his mistress. Being slapped in the face with the insults "the woman" had put on him, my father was ready for a calm, loving woman. It is a shame that it took him so long to see that he'd had it the whole time.

They continued to argue about everything, especially going to the racetrack. My father accused my mom of spending too much time out there. He even suggested she was having an affair with the same track photographer that I'd considered a friend. My mom had at last found something she could enjoy, and she wasn't even allowed to do it without her husband's ire. It was beyond any of us how a man could drop \$500 on races a day could even begin to accuse his wife (who would go out only with about \$40) of having a gambling problem, let alone an affair.

The motorcycle shut him up. Standing at the track watching both of them beam over my mother's biggest jackpot, I realized that she had humbled him. Her prize was a pure shocker, but her grace was not. Maybe it was the hot lights he was sitting under that hit him hard enough to knock some sense into him, but I think it was her ability to handle herself under pressure. After so long of dealing with one of the most painful and emotionally damning things a woman can



face, my mother sat on that motorcycle with everything she wanted: her husband at her side, her children close by, and a little bit of luck from the hobby she'd grown to love. She was stunning sitting on that bike, that sturdiness in her poised body, but the unique smile that let everyone know she deserved happiness. Like all of the patrons that passed by, my father was an outsider to her happiness, and he knew it. Nevertheless, she let him in, no questions asked. Her fortune was his, and I think it registered with him not to give that generosity up again.

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Some time after that big night, I was back in town for a few days over the summer. I'd moved to Kansas with my relatively new boyfriend for graduate school, and we headed to Chicago for our summer vacation. We stopped in Des Moines at my parents' house, discovered they were not home, and that they were probably not at work. It was natural to assume that they were at the track. We made a quick trip out to The Meadows, and as we walked in, I felt a rush of new appreciation for the casino. I stood in front of the escalator and listened to the constant chiming of spinning reels and clinking change. The smoke gave me a bit of a headache, and the colors overwhelmed my sense. Yet it wasn't at all unpleasant. In fact, it made me want to gamble.

We passed the security officer that seemed to recognize me, I assumed he was confusing me with my one of my sisters, and we made our way to the video slots that my mother does frighteningly well on. There she was, this time without the spotlight on her, but she looked happy. It wasn't the same look she had when she was watching her soaps; she actually seemed to have a real smile on her face. In her typical way, she was sitting next to some older woman with big white hair and a Prairie Meadows sweatshirt. They sat together, I assumed that either she was

one of my mom's coworkers or some random woman my mother had befriended, and laughed at the smallest chance that one of them might actually hit something big.

As we approached her, she didn't notice we were there until we were practically standing on her. She greeted us in the same pleasantly surprised manner that both my parents did whenever we showed up unannounced at the track. She gasped and said, "What are you two doing here? Hi, Jim Boy!" My mother was the only person who could get away with calling my boyfriend that. I'd asked her if she'd won me anything, and she laughed in the same way she always did when I asked that: mockingly. When I asked where Dad was, it was unusual to hear the lightness of her voice when she'd said, "I told that every time he comes up here, I start losing. So he went somewhere. You might try downstairs." The little old lady sitting next to my mother said in a loud cackle, "Yeah, she told him, 'Get out of here, old man. You're bad luck!'"

### Chapter Three—Make It So: The Rise of Nerd Culture

Jim Boyd is about five foot ten, closer to six foot with the brown, thick-soled Skechers he beams about recently purchasing. The compliments he receives on his taste are frequent. It isn't just the shoes. Boyd is regularly dressed in a trendy yet casual manner, and he's usually seen wearing brown, his favorite color. The bulk of his wardrobe is corduroy pants and flattering button downs. He sports a closely-cropped goatee that, when hit with the right light, shines with a mix of brown, blond, and red. As a toddler, Boyd's hair was white blond though his mother recently observed how dark it had become, more like a golden brown. He still labels himself as a blond. Boyd, on the surface, is an attractive, fair-haired, blue-eyed, long-lashed man.

On top of his pleasant physical appearance, Boyd drives a sports car, owns a DVD player, a new 27" TV, enjoys traveling, and seeing new things. He's educated (he's working on his Master's), and has a natural passion for living life to its fullest. If Boyd were to submit a personal ad, it seems women would respond in droves. But on that first date, the Boyd that would show up is not the textbook dream guy; he's a self-professed nerd.

One of the hobbies Boyd indulges in is sitting for about an hour every night in front of his iMac (named Sovereign) responding to, among a host of other subdivisions, the *Enterprise* section of [trektoday.com](http://trektoday.com). Who could blame him? The endeavor provides Boyd with an outlet to three of his favorite realms: *Star Trek*, computers, and bulletin board systems ([trektoday.com](http://trektoday.com) is a bulletin board system (BBS) something synonymous with an online forum).

But, according to Boyd, *Trek*, computers, and the nuances of the Internet alone do not a nerd make. If pressed (Boyd likes to digress frequently about those things he has an interest in if that isn't indicative of the very comments he makes about being a nerd), Boyd defines being a nerd as having intellectual curiosity and states that others claim it is an excessive intellectual

curiosity. A prime example would be Boyd's interest in *Star Trek*. If you ask him, and even if you don't, he'll tell you he's a Trekker. He'll own up that Trekkers don't like to be called Trekkies. To figure out the difference, ask any Trekker. Naming at least three of the five captains in the history of *Star Trek* makes you a Trekkie. Most of the American population can name at least Captain James T. Kirk and Captain Jean-Luc Picard. The key to being dubbed a Trekker, however, entails explaining, in detail, the difference between the *Enterprise NCC-1701-D* and the *Enterprise NCC-1701-E*. And to do that, you'd have to have followed *Trek* for a while. More than likely, you'd own a copy of the *Encyclopedia of Star Trek*. Though he owns the book, Boyd can explain the difference without it.

The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* has multiple definitions for the word "nerd," none of them positive. For instance, one definition states that a nerd is "an insignificant or contemptible person, one who is conventional, affected, or studious; a 'square,' a 'swot'." To add insult to injury, the *OED* goes on with "someone with objectionable habits or traits; an affected person . . . An uninteresting person, a 'dud'." With one final eye gouge, the last definition is stated as "people who don't live meaningful lives." While the *OED* states that the origin of the word "nerd" is unknown, it points out an interesting usage by none other than Dr. Seuss. In fact, the *OED* quotes him as writing this: "[. . .] And then, just to show them, I'll sail to Ka-Troo And Bring Back an It-Kutch, a Preep and a Proo, a Nerkle, a Nerd, and a Seersucker, too!" Not knowing exactly what that means, it seems as if the dictionary is suggesting that no one should be a nerd.

Being called a nerd, in most social situations, is usually meant to be an insult. It is a slang word that is synonymous with geek and dork. In the past, some nerds have preferred not to be referred to as geeks or dorks. Is there a difference? It depends on who you ask. Boyd claims that

there was a difference at one time, but in his experience, it seems to be changing. While he prefers nerd, he says, “you stick with what you grew up with.” The definition of the word “geek” actually finds its roots in carnival side show acts. Geeks were the people who would bite the heads off living creatures. Thankfully, the word has evolved. Now it is meant more for computer enthusiasts, i.e. computer geeks. Clearly, the current incarnation of nerds and geeks have a bit in common. But how about dorks?

The *OED* offers a definition one may not expect. According to the *OED*, a dork’s primary definition is . . . a penis. Dork, apparently, is a variation on the word “dick.” As dick has been appropriated to mean a jerk, the word dork cannot be too far behind. For the anti-nerd, the prep, dork was defined in the 1980s by Lisa Birnbach’s *The Official Preppy Handbook* as “a clumsy person who does not know Prep sayings and attitudes” (219). The trait dorky is “that which is characterized by clumsiness or ignorance of, for instance, how to mix a Bloody [Mary]” (Birnbach 219).

For all intents and purposes, a dork, a geek, and a nerd are essentially the same thing. Undesirable. This negative connotation, for gen-Xers, seems to have found its foundation in the 1980s. An acknowledgment of the nerd came on the scene through movies. Being a prep was defined by movies like *Porky’s*, where buff, beautiful high school seniors played pranks on thin, equally beautiful cheerleaders and on undesirables. The fat gym teacher was just one of the less fortunate. The rebuttal to this frat boy-ish, preppy party film came in *Revenge of the Nerds*. *Revenge of the Nerds*, although contributing to the nerd stereotype, was about nerd empowerment. It was a film about Louis, Wormser, and Poindexter, being themselves and winning the day by staying true to what they knew. Through their nerdy pursuits, they overcame the peer pressures of the “cool” preps.

Although it's difficult to say when nerd culture started to face less criticism, there has certainly been a shift. Nerd empowerment seems to be at an all-time high. Some are even arguing that nerd culture is actually moving out of mainstream society and back into the recesses of subculture, as was recently heard on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. Boyd thinks that while nerd culture did undergo an awakening with the Internet craze of the late '90s, it has always maintained its underground status much like many marginalized cultures have. "Certain elements of most underground cultures appeal to the mainstream public at large, but only the most stereotypical and digestible morsels will become part of the mainstream. The bulk of nerd culture, as with African American culture and gay and lesbian culture, remains mainly hidden from view," asserts Boyd.

Some of the best examples of nerd empowerment come from television, the Internet, and the computing world. First, there is old reliable. *Star Trek* is in the middle of a newfound popularity with its latest series simply entitled, *Enterprise*. The show reeks of sex appeal. Yet, *Trek* sex appeal is not as new as *Enterprise*. It's true that a bulk of *Trek*'s fan base consists of the stereotypical young men who can't get girlfriends. However, it hasn't always been for men. In the beginning, it was Captain Kirk who was played by a young, buff, and charming William Shatner. The character who couldn't get women to leave him alone (not that he was trying). However, Shatner was not the ladies' favorite. It was actually Leonard Nimoy's strong, emotionless Mr. Spock character over which women viewers swooned. Roughly, twenty years after the start of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (TOS, to Trekkers), the dapper Jean-Luc Picard gained ladies' favor when Patrick Stewart took on the role as captain in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG). Many argue that he renewed the sexy bald look for the early '90s. At least, he did wonders for bald men with women in the thirty and under crowd.

The eye candy for men throughout those two series ranged from a young Majel Barrett (Gene Rodenberry's widow) who played Nurse Chapel in *ST: TOS* (Barrett was actually slated to play second in command until NBC told Rodenberry to ditch the woman or ditch the Vulcan) to Marina Sirtis, who starred as the empathic ship's Counselor Deanna Troi on *ST: TNG*.

The series spin-offs continued shortly after *ST: TNG* with *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (*ST: DS9*) donning a young British gentleman doctor named Bashir and a confident, free-spirited Trill (a species in *Trek*) named Jadzia Dax. With *Star Trek: Voyager* (*ST: VOY*), there was, of course, a female captain, but men got their first taste of drop dead gorgeous with actress Jeri Ryan. Ryan, who came in to the show later to boost ratings, played Seven of Nine, a human woman saved from a race of perfectionist machines named the Borg, and yes, it's short for Cyborg. Ryan's character, Seven for short, was seen every week in a tight, metallic "cat suit," as Trekkers called it, to keep the male fans dropping in regularly.

And then there's *Enterprise*. The captain this time around is the already established, Estrogen-Brigade victim, Scott Bakula. Bakula received his Brigade status (an Estrogen Brigade is usually a website that allows women to get together and compare notes on the latest hot actor) after starring in NBC's *Quantum Leap*. Bakula plays Captain Jonathan Archer whose first officer is another model in a "cat suit." The character, T'Pol, is played by Jolene Blalock, a two-time *Maxim* cover goddess. Blalock's layouts in *Maxim* consist of her wearing either a leopard print bra, a white feather boa, and occasionally, nothing but a lot of eye makeup.

The *Enterprise* crew is probably the most sexually appealing yet. Bakula and Blalock lead the cast of actors including Connor Trinneer (his character is the ship's sexy southern engineer), Linda Park (a Japanese-American gen-Xer with a killer smile), and Dominic Keating (a British actor who has already gained the nickname on [trektoday.com](http://trektoday.com) of "Captain SexyBitch").

It seems as if each episode—the series is nearing the end of its first season—is measured by who shows the most skin.

From the hormone-driven discussions on [trektoday.com](http://trektoday.com), there is the equally hormone-driven world of nerd Internet. Thanks to the Internet, nerd sex appeal is nothing compared to nerd sex. Or nerd porn for that matter. At their own volition, many young women, self-professed nerds, are submitting erotic photos to a website named [nakkidnerds.com](http://nakkidnerds.com). The ladies range from pink haired and excessively pierced to conservative, librarian types with thick-framed glasses. They are, undoubtedly, average, yet their nerdiness is what creates their undeniable appeal. The beautiful thing about [nakkidnerds.com](http://nakkidnerds.com) is that these women are finding pride in the very appearance for which they are often criticized.

These ladies are pretty Internet savvy, which is one of the reasons nerd men are so attracted to them. In the early days of the Internet, the days when people communicated through bulletin board systems and graphics were made up of green specks on the screen, women were a rarity. When a woman did appear on a BBS, she was irresistible to the men on the board. The fact that a woman was keen enough about computing to get on a BBS was all the male nerds needed. Though computing is historically a male dominated field, current female nerds have certainly made computing an activity for all nerds.

Boyd was one of those teenagers on the bulletin boards systems long before the Internet moved in to the public spotlight. He loves computers in general. Though he admits to being a bit unfamiliar when it comes to repairing the hardware of a computer, he tries at every chance to learn that much more. A particular interest of his is Apple Computer: the company, the CEO, and the products. At one time, Boyd owned seven different Macs just because he could. He finds that Apple is the perfect company for nerds to look up to, and Boyd asserts that he wanted to be like



Steve Jobs. Apple was started by nerds, and the company has always been the underdog in the computing industry to Microsoft, a company also started by a nerd. It was from the parts that Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak collected that Apple Computer found its start in a garage. Indeed, Steve Jobs' true nerdiness emerged as a child when at the age of thirteen, Jobs went to Hewlett-Packard to ask for spare parts to build a computing machine. According to Boyd from his past readings of Jobs' life, Jobs was even said to have designed the schematics for a color television in a time when color sets were still expensive. Jobs was only nine years old.

Apple has come a long way. This past January, Apple's CEO, Steve Jobs, the company's co-founder, introduced the new iMac to a crowd of drooling nerds at the 2002 MacWorld Convention in San Francisco. The gaggle of computer geeks was stunned silent at the new design; a reaction similar to that of the first incarnation of the iMac, the first computer with a color shell. Looking a bit like the little lamp that hops across the screen and squishes the "I" in Pixar at the beginning of the *Toy Story* movies, the iMac introduced this year has a base that looks like a large, white gumdrop. The clear handle reaching up from the base to the monitor allows the screen to swivel in every direction, and the flat-panel monitor has a clear ring, or "halo" as some have been calling it, around the edge. This is Steve Jobs' baby. He's even said that he wanted it to look like a flower.

The original iMac is what got Jobs popular with Apple users after being ousted by the company in 1985. Jobs had been disposed of by the company's board of directors after a debacle over two of the company's future machines, the Lisa and the Macintosh. After starting his own company and heading up the computer animation studio, Pixar (see any connections here?), Jobs came back to Apple in 1997 as a consultant. By the time the original iMac caught on after being

released in 1998, Jobs became the interim CEO of his own company (Jobs jokingly called himself the iCEO).

The original iMac gave the design world something to live up to. Shortly after the model of Bondi blue iMac, the same model that sits on Boyd's desk, was introduced, the commercial design world had a fit (Bondi, by the way, came from Bondi Beach in Australia where the water was a rich, bluish-green color). When the iMac emerged in five different colors in 1999—blueberry, strawberry, lime, tangerine and grape—there were translucent, multi-colored radios, lamps, and inflatable furniture everywhere in the same five colors with slight alterations on the names (instead of grape, it became wine to avoid legal action by Apple). It was Jobs' famous "vision" that started the trend to make everything else as cool . . . as computing.

The other co-founder of Apple, Steve Wozniak, took a different path in life. Instead of revolutionizing the shape of computing (Wozniak had already revolutionized computing altogether by building the Apple II), Woz, for short, got out of the industry and started teaching children about computers. It was important to Woz to always have fun with his pursuits in life, and after Steve Jobs started getting power hungry with the early successes of Apple, Woz grew tired of the politics and left Apple for good. He took his portion of nerd culture to middle school children. While Jobs has practically trademarked his image of blue jeans, tennis shoes, and black turtlenecks, Woz is a chunky, homely guy who wears Hawaiian shirts over Apple t-shirts (ironically). His third wife, whom he'd attended junior high with, said, "I was the cheerleader, he was the nerd" of her husband ([woz.org](http://woz.org)). Taking his passion about computers to a different realm, Woz wants to pass the torch of his technological curiosity on to the kids he teaches for the sake and encouragement of their intellectual curiosity. It seems as if Boyd's definition of a nerd is accurate.

So, why, when all our lives we are encouraged by society to go to school and get an education would “cool” people make fun of and socially exclude the intellectually curious? The answer to this is not clear-cut. It’s important to know a bit about who nerds really are. Nerds cannot be pinned down as poor kids, although many are in situations where their families cannot afford to or are not willing to buy them brand-name clothing. Abercrombie and Fitch nerds do not wear. Boyd recalls seeing one of the kids he knew in school come dressed in NASA gear. “He never lived that one down for as long as I can remember. He was still getting shit for that in high school,” Boyd laughs and then swiftly adds that he never went that far. Sometimes, it’s just that the nerds don’t have what Boyd calls the “concept” of what is considered “in” or “cool.” Most nerds are too worried about obsessing over their interests, that intellectual curiosity that Boyd spoke of, than bothering with fashion or looking “cool.” It isn’t so much that they are unconcerned with consumer culture either. The obsession over nerdy toys and computers proves that. Clothes to nerds often serve little purpose other than covering their bodies.

Boyd not only understands this desire for information, he lives it. He does, after all, study library and information management. Ask Boyd about the difference of the *Enterprise D* and the *Enterprise E*, as stated earlier, and you’ll get a thorough report on the history of the *Starship Enterprise*. In a truly nerdy move, as I discovered, Boyd will even whip out the *Encyclopedia of Star Trek* just to show off that he owns it. To explain it simply, the difference between the *USS Enterprise NCC-1701-D* and *E* is seen in the movie, *Star Trek: Generations*. The *NCC-1701-D* crash lands on a planet (Vidiiian II, according to Boyd), and of course, Captain Picard and his crew needed a new ship. Hence, the *USS Enterprise NCC-1701-E*. In Boyd’s short lecture, he also stated that the *D* is a *Galaxy* class ship, and *E* is a *Sovereign* class ship. The complexities of this detail are much too lengthy to explain.

When he's called on it, he is quick to defend his obsession over the details. Boyd points out one of the finer qualities of nerds that might keep them from looking "cool." He asserts, "Nerds have an eye for detail. And it isn't really just a nerd thing. If you ask a guy who is really into football some of the statistics about his favorite player or team, he can usually rattle them off. And some women do it, so it isn't even just a gender thing. It's just that nerds tend to be more obsessive over the things that interest them."

For most nerds, a major influence in life was the torment of peer pressure in school. Most can remember being in school and feeling the pressure to pretend like the thing that those crotchety old teachers were babbling on about were completely uncool and irrelevant. To be cool, it was important not to care. Nerds, instead, got involved. Some found science class interesting, like Boyd who proclaimed that as a child, he read *Odyssey* magazine, "the ultimate nerdy kid science magazine" as he put it. Others found themselves interested in math and even others in reading.

Sometimes being dubbed a nerd wasn't just about trying gain knowledge in school. It also had to do with athletic prowess. Watch any movie about the coming of age. Two kids are picking their teams for soccer and slowly but surely, the line gets thinner and thinner. Soon, the only person standing is the nerdy kid with the thick glass and the bowtie. As much as no one wanted that kid on the team, chances are, the nerdy kid just wanted to go read a book. The embarrassment most nerds faced when it came to athletics was damaging. Boyd's hand-eye coordination that he developed from playing video and computer games is much better than his basketball dribbling abilities. No one knows better than him how clueless he is about the purpose of football.

Regardless of what it was that labeled you a nerd, there was torment. Kids, as they say, are downright mean. The insults were not easy to ignore. In his elementary school years, Boyd was called “Avoid the Noid” Jimmy Boyd. Domino’s Pizza, needless to say, has never been a particular favorite of Boyd’s. As Boyd entered high school and developed a circle of friends, he practically became invisible. Even his teachers thought him so irrelevant that when Boyd regularly began skipping class, his teachers gave him in-school suspension as a matter of the norm. What they didn’t realize that Boyd was so bored with the subject matter that he just wanted to go to in-school suspension to read his own books. When Boyd was told that he’d better change his attitude because he wasn’t going to get anywhere, he changed his GPA from a 1.7 to a 3.5 just to prove he could do it.

To get beyond the torment of cliques and social expectations in school, most nerds needed to find a way to be better than the taunting. The path to empowerment came when nerds began to grasp that what made them nerdy was that they were interested in the “wrong” things and wore the “out” clothes, but most of them didn’t want to give up the things they loved. In other words, nerds began to welcome nerdity when they recognized it meant self-acceptance. The catalyst for each nerd is different. Boyd gives credit to a number of things, but his first one is the grunge movement. Grunge did what others didn’t dare try: letting it all hang out. What better way to prevent the insults than to push away the popular and embrace the outcast? Nerds began making it clear that even if they could afford to look “cool,” they didn’t want to. Some nerds dressed in flannels and dirty jeans, accepting the unclean look as their own. Suddenly, the grunge look was the “in” look.

Others might attribute the rise of the nerd in business. Indeed, the story of Bill Gates cannot be avoided. Gates, often dubbed the world’s richest nerd, was recognized as being too

smart to slip by. He made his fortune on his intelligence and his nerdy image, much the same way that the founders of Apple had. If Gates had looked like Mel Gibson, his influence over the computer industry might have been completely different. Soon, it dawned on a few nerds that the way to money was power, and the way to power was knowledge. The boom of the dot-com provided nerds a chance to establish themselves at the top of the food chain. The corporate nerd is easily located. He—and it is still mostly he—can be found living in Silicon Valley where the cost of living is so high that a college teacher can start out making \$50,000 a year.

To comprehend the world of the nerd, it is essential to understand where an individual nerd's priorities lie. In school, a nerd focuses on knowledge while a popular student pays attention to looking cool, and more than likely, dating. Crudely put, most male nerds want to get smart to make money while others just want to get laid. Not that nerds are above sex, it just seems to hit most nerd men later in life. The reasons for this may be that nerd men simply don't notice sex until their sexual peak. Another reason may be because women don't give nerd men the time of day until college. But college does have an impact. For most nerds, college is seen as an escape from the monotony of public school life. In college, the nerd can avoid those people that make him or her uncomfortable. In truth, a nerd creates his/her own world. This is not far from what Boyd did.

Boyd saw college as a mandatory step in life. When he got there, he made up his mind to live it up. Like most kids, he was on his own in a world where his image was up to him. Hanging out with his friends in their dorms or at downtown coffee shops, and flirting with any girl that was willing, Boyd found a life he truly loved. Boyd's dating life took off. Though he had a few girlfriends during his teenage years, mostly girls from the area that he grew up in, Boyd starting

taking advantage of his new freedom. Within three years, Boyd dated five different women; only one he claims was a nerd.

Nerd dating is not as complex as one might think. There aren't clubs for nerds, nor are there personal ads for just nerds, at least none that are terribly prominent. However, nerds do attract nerds. But beyond that, being a nerd has its perks in the dating arena not just for fellow nerds, but also for anyone paying attention. Women cannot underestimate the attractiveness of a male nerd. Many male nerds are lacking when it comes to understanding romance. However, what male nerds are missing with romance they make up with passion. The same passion that nerd men have for their hobbies seems to carry over with other things, or people for that matter, that they are interested in. Granted, sometimes nerd men are swooped up by the latest development in their areas of interest. Occasionally, they forget about life's other details (like time in general), but most nerd men understand the importance of passion.

Since most people identify the word "nerd" with men, very few people have an understanding of the attractiveness of a nerdy woman. The appeal for a nerdy man when it comes to nerdy women is that nerd women have knowledge. While some men find an intelligent woman intimidating, many nerd men find it downright sexy. Boyd states "it's attractive because you don't have to recover lost ground with them. A normal woman, you'd have to get her to understand you. With a nerdy woman, you don't have to explain." Moreover, Boyd adds, "They're hot. A woman would have to wear glasses for me to be sexually attracted to her."

Nerd women more than likely feel the same way about nerd men. But there is also the fact that nerd men can empathize with the emotional torments that nerd women have endured. It isn't so much that nerd women need nerd men to validate emotions left over from school, but for

nerd women, like most women, it's important to be understood as a person. And that's the overall goal, it seems for nerds of any gender: to simply be accepted and understood as people.

The dangers of this lack of understanding of nerds as human beings are beginning to come out in scary ways. Some nerds are starting to strike back at the distressing criticism faced in schools. This reaction, many say, is the impetus behind the school shootings, more specifically, the Columbine shootings. Both of the boys involved in the shooting were outcasts from the popular groups in the schools, and while they may not consider themselves nerds, one can guess that their peers might have. It is difficult to say whether or not peer pressure is growing more intense or if outcast kids are getting more frustrated more quickly. Regardless, the message that schools need to build the confidence of children from diverse backgrounds is slowly emerging. The discussions of school uniforms resurfaced a decade ago with gang-related shootings, but many nerds sought relief in the idea because it meant some of those cruel remarks from other kids would lessen. The problem, however, reaches far beyond clothes.

The acceptance of the nerd has seen new light with recent nerd empowerment movements, yet most would argue that as long as kids come home crying because of hair pulling and name calling all because of how they look or acted, not enough is being done. As *All Things Considered* claimed, nerd culture may be facing a sort of bowing out from center stage, but the message, acceptance is key, is still there. Regardless of how society accepts them, nerds may have found a way to demand respect. With a society so deeply immersed in technology, nerds cannot only remain in positions of power, but also there is potential for nerds to continue to grow wealthy. Nerds like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs have the money to do what they desire. It seems as if the industries that nerds manipulate are so mainstream that they are always mentioned first in the market reports on news networks. This may prove to be the nerd's revenge indeed.



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## Chapter Four—The Bleachers

Almost everyday on Chicago's television station, WGN, my father and I watched the Cubs lose. No matter how painful the loss, we would come back the next day ready to do it all over again. We shared a passion for the Cubs that was more of a painful one-way relationship. It's the story of any die-hard Cubs fan. Regardless, every year my father and I planned at least one trip to Wrigley Field to catch a Cubs game. The trips meant, among other things, finding something for my father and me to talk about for at least twelve hours. When we talked at home, the discussions tended toward politics, leading us into arguments that ended with me storming off to my bedroom. I was the youngest daughter (i.e. the most protected), but I was also the most outspoken. Of my sisters, he seemed to enjoy my company, when not discussing politics, because I was the only one who cared about sports. I had the traits of the son my father never had.

There was hope in '98, a chance, if not a slight chance, for the Cubs to make it to the playoffs as the wildcard team. In early September, it came down to matching the Colorado Rockies game per game. But we weren't scoreboard watching. 1998 was also the year of the home-run race between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. It meant everything to us to have a Cub in the spotlight. We grew used to the media overlooking our team, a team that was simply expected to lose. In '98, we couldn't get enough of it, just like everyone else. People who normally didn't follow baseball asked daily if Mark or Sammy hit any. Sammy's famous "Baseball's been berry, berry good to me" speech was repeated in commercials promising to sell complete coverage of the home-run race at season's end. Even worse, the media tried to pit the two sports stars against each other. Journalists asked Mark if he thought Sammy was capable of catching up with him in the way children on the playground would tell other kids that so and so

said something bad about you. Mark, a seemingly no-nonsense guy, brushed them off. It was all to our delight, and maybe it brought my father and me closer than ever.

Although we'd both be watching the same game, I often watched the games in my room where I had six posters of Mark Grace, the Cubs first baseman, covering my walls. While my father was home, I wanted to be away from him. But it was fun to hear him yell at the television when random sports commentators speculated on Sammy Sosa's inferiority to Mark McGwire. "Oh, shut up!" my father would yell at the reporters on the television. I remember walking in to the living room (or the front room as we called it) to join in shouting at the television. It didn't matter to me then, but now I wonder how my father, a man from Guyana who had been in the States for more than thirty years, became a Cubs fan. I'd taken for granted as a teenager all the times we had gone to Cubs games when I was younger. If I were to ask him, I imagine it would be because of the connection to cricket. As far as I know, cricket is a huge sport in Guyana, and clearly, the two sports have great similarity. But as well as baseball and cricket being similar, I know my dad was athletic in high school. He was a wrestler, which he never fails to remind anyone of when he tells them he weighs the same as he did when he wrestled thirty-plus years ago.

Whenever we did sit together to watch games, my father performed his daily routine of putting on his uniform for his work on the force. He polished his boots, pinned his immaculate badges on his shirt, which hung on the old hinges of a door that was no longer there. My father has a very distinctive way of tucking in his shirt, not even paying attention to the movements that were second nature to him after serving as an officer for the Des Moines Police Department for twenty years. He'd stand in front of the couch, pants around his ankles, shirt covering him from any spying neighbors across the street, those he never really trusted. He pinched his shirt

between his knees, carefully pulling his pants up over the shirt. My sisters and I made fun of him for it. He'd always respond with, "Hey, it works." Just a few years ago, my boyfriend pointed out that I tuck the same way.

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It was impossible not to want to be at Wrigley in 1998. I knew my dad wanted to go; I was itching to catch one of those million-dollar, official MLB home run balls. (Who was I kidding? The only foul ball I ever got, my mom picked up off the ground as it rolled over to her chair.) I don't recall how the conversation got started, but it couldn't have been much different from all of the other conversations that led to one of our long, one-day trips to Chicago. My father would ask me out of the blue if I was free on a certain day, which meant he wanted to drive up to Chicago, see a game, and drive back at night. He would look at his MasterCard intently, and back at me, letting me know that he had it covered, all I had to do was give a day. For this game, however, our problem was how to get tickets when Sammy Sosa was just a few homers away from breaking the record.

The one-day trips were exhausting. We'd leave the house by 6:30 a.m., hit Chicago around 11:30 (earlier with good weather, a little speeding, or light traffic). I have a feeling my dad will deny it, but he likes to speed. He's a police officer, and if one officer stops another, there's a code of behavior that they follow, which includes a slap on the wrist for speeding. For this trip, we left in his new pickup. I wasn't particularly fond of trucks, but I grew to love this one when I got to drive it for two weeks when my parents were in Florida for a family reunion. It was a slick, black Chevy S10, one of the smaller Chevy trucks. Taking me with him to help him make the decision of what to buy, Dad had test driven a huge, red truck. I told him that if he got that one, he'd have to buy me a stepstool to get into it. Considering Dad was just tall enough to

make it into the police academy, he agreed the red one wasn't the right truck. But the S10 was stellar. It had a CD player, four-wheel drive, power everything . . . it was loaded. Needless to say, it was a smooth ride to the game. The conversation, however, was rough.

While we were excited about the game, I dreaded the drive since it meant we'd have to engage in real conversation while sitting together in close quarters. Sometimes we talked about things we agreed on, yet we still managed to find something to argue about. Our worst arguments were usually about proving our knowledge. One day, as we were having a normal, civilized conversation, one of us mentioned Brazil. I have no idea how we got there, but we were arguing about the official language of Brazil. I was claiming it was Portuguese, my father, Spanish. My sister knew the answer as well and defended me, yet the further the conversation went, the more frustrated my father and I got over being doubted by the other. Eventually, my mother told us to drop it, and I did so to try to prevent running off to my room in tears. But my dad could never let anything go (really, I can't either), and he grabbed an encyclopedia. He was always quick to cover by changing the subject or clarifying what he really meant when he was wrong.

Other discussions over homosexuality, war, and crime caused me to face my father's temper and loud voice, and our conversations went nowhere real fast. He would end up frustrated; I would cry. So, for our one-day jaunts to Chicago, I got to the point where I read the entire time. For me, it was heavenly. I could complete a book in the twelve hours we spent in the car. My dad started to show his disappointment. I think he regretted that our available topics were so limited. He asked once if I was going to read the whole time. Something told me I should put down my book, so I tried to tell him about what I was reading. The conversation faltered quickly when I said it was a *Star Trek* book. We would go back to our own thoughts. He would drive, looking at the scenery, moving around a lot to keep awake, dancing to his Indian

music, etc. I read. Once in a while, I'd look up, maybe mention something funny I'd read to him, but the point seemed to get lost upon him. It wasn't that he didn't understand why I'd mention things to him, it just never interested him. Rarely did I fall asleep on the way up out of fear of him nodding off. Even though he's never completely fallen asleep at the wheel, he has been known to nod off. So, we'd sit mostly silent for nearly six hours, not stopping for gas or snacks. Our goal was to get to Chicago and get into the game.

I hated his driving, too. He was a safe driver, and I knew intellectually he would never get us into a major accident. As it was his job as an officer to drive around Des Moines, chases were a part of his job description; really, I had nothing to fear. Yet, in that same impatient manner that I have today, he would tailgate slower drivers to force them to let him pass. While he never really did this maliciously, I frequently found myself pushing my feet into the floor searching for an invisible brake pedal.

Getting to Wrigley was an adventure, as well. Whenever my parents were driving to the stadium, we got lost. I picked up on some of the colloquialisms in Chicago as I got older, knew that the Lake was always east, and could find the park within a few minutes. Finding Wrigley is hard though because it doesn't show itself quite like Comiskey Park does on the other side of town. Comiskey sits on a major interstate. It is one of those parks that when you sit in the upper deck, you get light-headed and fear falling over the balcony railings onto the field. Wrigley sits nestled between a bunch of tightly packed, neighborhood apartment houses, aptly named Wrigleyville. The lights of the park are what to look for, but they aren't visible until you're within two blocks. I can't imagine how much closer you'd have to be in order to see the stadium before 1988, the year they installed the lights.

Occasionally, my dad and I would get to the games earlier than we expected. One particular trip, there was no one outside the stadium yet. It was quiet; the sports shops that boasted Cubs paraphernalia weren't even open. That was the year I got to meet Dave Magadan. Magadan wasn't a well-known player, but I had a crush on him, and felt that he would have been a great Cubs player. He seemed to come through when the team—whatever team it was considering Magadan played for at least ten teams before he eventually became a Cub for a year—really needed it. This was the year Magadan was playing for the Houston Astros. As my dad and I were walking past the shops, I saw the ever handsome Magadan getting out of a cab, wearing a white polo shirt, tight jeans, dark sunglasses, and carrying a duffle bag. Instantly, I recognized his black hair and his sharp jaw line, then grabbed my dad's arm.

“Dad! That's Dave Magadan!” I think my dad knew who he was; I'm sure he had at least heard that name somewhere. We walked over to Magadan, and I asked if he wouldn't mind posing for a picture with me. He politely obliged; I think he was a little surprised that a) someone recognized him out of uniform, and b) he was in Chicago, being asked by a short girl wearing a Mark Grace Cubs jersey if she could get a picture with him. But my dad was insistent, all for my benefit. He kept asking me if I had something for Magadan to write on to get an autograph. I declined, told Magadan thanks, and walked back to my father.

“Why didn't you ask for his autograph?” My dad looked at me in surprise.

“Because the picture is enough,” I told him. A few years later on a trip we took to see the Cubs play in St. Louis, we relived the same moment with a professional wrestler that I liked in a Marriott by the airport. This time, my dad knew that this guy (It was The Rock who starred in *The Mummy Returns*) was even more famous than Magadan. But all I wanted to do was shake the wrestler's hand, while my dad was urgently pressing my mother to go grab the camera. I told

my dad no. In a way, I know my dad just wanted me to be able to keep that memory, but what he doesn't know is that I don't need a picture or an autograph to remember times like that. Just a computer and keyboard.

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As game time neared, it was still plainly obvious that we didn't have tickets. I was panicked, convinced that there was no way we were getting in. Addison, Clark, Waveland, and Sheffield were already filled with cars, officers directed traffic, and droves of people trying to get to their seats in time to catch Sammy hit about five or six to the bleachers during BP.

"We'll get tickets," he said as he folded a sheet of paper in half with his middle aged, brown hands, and wrote in big, choppy-looking capitals "NEED 2 TICKETS." He handed the sign to me, and told me to stick it in my window while he drove around looking for a parking spot.

Within five minutes, maybe even less, an average looking white guy with dark blond hair waved at us. It felt like a drug transaction. My dad asked how much, the guy said forty each for two bleacher seats. I looked at my dad incredulously as he responded with a simple "thirty." (Bleacher seats were \$20 through the ticket office.) The guy said "alright," and the tickets and the money were exchanged. I grew unnerved.

"How do we know we'll get in? Can't they tell if we've got scalped tickets?" I'd never bought from scalpers before. I was sure Wrigley Field security in the bleachers (their more like bouncers, really) would find out, then eject us. That was only if we managed to get in. My dad was confident that we would be OK. Then he reminded me that I was skeptical about getting tickets, and not only did we have tickets, we had bleacher seats, some of the most coveted seats at Wrigley.



We managed to find a parking spot for twenty dollars. My dad felt good about the spot because it was right across from the stadium with iron bars surrounding it. I thought that if I ever made enough money, I wanted to live in the apartment complex next to the lot, but apartments in Wrigleyville, as a friend of mine from high school found out, do not come cheap.

We walked to the back of Wrigley, passing the barking souvenirs men, the little cheeseburger joint with the subtle smells that was always packed right before a game, the McDonald's across the street from the cheeseburger joint, and the Chicago traffic. People pushed passed us, trying to get to their seats as soon as possible. I feared that there would be nothing left for us out in the free-for-all that was the bleacher seats. At the back, it wasn't as quiet as it usually is. There was a bit of a line for the bleachers, but as I wasn't accustomed to sitting out with the bleacher bums, I was astonished to see the tight security at the gate. Not only were there guys with radios, but guys with radios and scanners. They scanned every ticket, making sure it was legitimate. Again, I panicked.

“What if these tickets aren't real?” I asked my dad, looking to him for the reassurance of which he was usually full. This time, he looked a little nervous, still reassuring me that the tickets were legit, followed by “I hope.” I was sure we'd go to jail. My mind started concocting all sorts of horrible things that were going to happen to us in the Cook County jail. The men at the gate seemed like large men that could carry us away and lock us up. Out of instinct and necessity, I stood as close to my father as I could, looking to him for safety. When it was finally our turn to step up to the scan man, my father acted as if nothing were wrong; I stayed quiet. The scan beeped; he let us in. My father and I, getting back that natural distance we usually had, exchanged looks of relief.

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It's difficult to describe the walk up to the bleachers. The walk up consists of long, steep, green ramps that are unquestionably more challenging if you've gotten a head start on the extracurricular activities of attending a game by visiting one of the bars across from the park. And to make sure that you don't leave sober, there are at least two alcohol vendors on the trip up as well. On one cold day in the bleachers a few years ago, my dad bought me a peach daiquiri. It was a clumpy slushie with a gallon of rum. Given the cost, I told him he should have just smuggled a bottle in for me.

Once you've gotten to the top, there's Wrigley Field. A thick, natural carpet of Kentucky bluegrass makes the air feel clean. Before the game, the infield dirt is usually sprayed with water that makes it look like a dark, reddish brown. Wrigley Field is the ideal front lawn for a large house in the suburbs. The players are usually peppered all over the field, stretching in ways that the body shouldn't be stretched. I remember my dad laughing at me because I could recognize Mark Grace in a second. It didn't matter if his legs were up in the air or if he was sprinting out in left field. It was as if I had a tracking device implanted to know where my childhood crush was at all times.

To our fortune, the bleachers hadn't completely filled up yet. We found seats in the fifth row in right center field, just a holler away from where Sosa stood at the top half of every inning. The hard, dull green bleachers were uncomfortable, and they would get increasingly so as more people filtered in. I was convinced that the reason everyone loved the bleachers so much was because they were too numb from the alcohol to feel the hard plastic under their butts.

Half of the bleacher bums couldn't sit still for longer than an inning. If they didn't have to go to the bathroom, they were getting more beer, or just moving seats. There is a sense of the short-term in the bleachers at the "Friendly Confines." Sometimes, it's because the people are

only going to be there for a short time before they get ejected. One guy in particular let it be known that he loved attention. This guy and his friend were sitting just behind us in right center. They were loud, rude, and very, very drunk. The longer the game went on, the more comments they made about the guys in the outfield and the people around them. The attention starved guy just kept getting louder and louder, while his buddy kept getting quieter and lower on his portion of bench.

At about the fifth inning, they disappeared. But they weren't gone for long. The guy was still yelling, but this time, he and his pal were in the section just below the manual scoreboard in the center field bleachers. We kept an eye on them for comic relief's sake. My dad started laughing hysterically, getting that high-pitched tone going, as he told me to watch the quiet one. Some how, the guy had managed to get to the stairs. We didn't know if he was going for the bathroom or more beer (we hoped it was the former). But the stairs at the back of the bleachers are more like long slats with occasion one-foot drops. The quiet one had some difficulty maneuvering these slats, even as he gripped the fence, which he hoped would help him walk. I looked around to notice that no one around him knew he was there, but everyone in our section was watching him, yelling out "Whoa!" every time the guy stumbled. Finally, he fell completely out of sight getting our section of the bleachers to cheer loudly.

But his loud buddy was left to his own devices. For a little while longer, that guy disappeared again. But as I was absent-mindedly looking around at the bleachers, I heard and saw an uproar in left field. Sure enough, in the center of the ruckus, was Loud Boy, all alone. He was facing the back of the bleachers. Security patiently stood waiting for the guy to leave the park. But he had other plans in mind. The guy wanted to show everyone his inebriated dancing skills before he left. First, he yelled at security, I can only assume it was about how much they

sucked. He pointed frantically at them as if they were the ones that should be ejected. When they responded by waving for him to come with them, he did what he felt was the only thing to do. He lifted his shirt, realized there wasn't much to show there, and then dropped his pants to reveal gleaming white boxers. By this point, my dad jokingly said, "Yuck, who wants to see his butt?" He'd even had enough of this guy. But the drunk wasn't finished. He must have figured that showing them his boxers wasn't enough. So, he lowered them as well given everyone behind him and security a full view of this his bleacher-flattened ass. As security headed for him, he proceeded to turn around, drop his boxers again, and flash security. By the reactions on the faces of the people around him, apparently, everyone got a good look.

Guys like that seem to be the regular at Wrigley, and I think since my dad is off duty, that's why he likes it. He loves to watch stupid people make complete fools of themselves. While I mind being doused with beer every time a Cubs player gets a hit, my dad thrives on it. For some reason, probably because my father has always loved to laugh (who wouldn't after being spit on and kicked by criminals), it was the id of everyone around him that exhilarated him and made him laugh harder than anything I've ever seen.

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My father had asked me on the ride up if I thought Sammy was going to hit one that day. Unlike days when I just felt like the Cubs were going to win, I just wasn't sure. I can't remember what I said exactly, but I remember hoping it was going to happen. My dad, however, was almost sure of it. He believed in the Cubs a little more than I did, probably because he's been a fan for longer than I've been alive. For him though, I think he felt like we were going to see something amazing just because everything was right for it. It's difficult to explain, but my father has always had a spooky ability for accurate predictions.

We sat in the bleachers, squished together with people who reeked of smoke, beer, and who knows what else, looking forward to watching the game. As much as I love my father, sitting that close to him proved awkward. I was never sure what to say, if I should acknowledge it or just sit there and be content that we're at a game. While he may have minded, he never let on that it bothered him. In fact, he seemed happy to have me that close so he could protect me in case anyone got too rowdy.

The Cubs played the Milwaukee Brewers, their newest rivals thanks to some maneuvering by the officials of Major League Baseball, that afternoon. I remember lightheartedly booing Jeromy Burnitz, a "Cub killer." Whenever the guy gets to Wrigley, he pounds the ball into the bleachers. He loves hitting there. But I don't think I was paying attention to the game as much as I should have been because it was all about Sammy. Being in right field gave us privileges. That meant that we were in Sammy's house. To this day, when Sammy leaves the dugout to take his position in the outfield, he sprints hard out to the far right corner and does a fly by with his hand cupped to his ear. It's the responsibility of the right field bleacher bums to let Sammy know how damn cool he really is. And we did. We yelled our heads off, and Sammy would show his love with his usual chest thump, his kiss of his two fingers, and then point to the crowd. He's one of the few players in baseball that lets the fans know practically every inning that he appreciates them. That day was particularly sweet for Sammy because he had to have known the cheers were not only out of sheer admiration, but also out of encouragement to get out there and hit a few more.

The inning for #61 escapes me; the moment is a blur. It happened quickly. The sound, however, still rings in my mind. It was, as they say, obvious as soon as he hit the ball. The sound was sharp and resonant. That sound of wood smacking a baseball and sending it over four

hundred feet away invigorated the crowd of 40,000. The cheers became so loud that the concrete below our feet shook, and we knew that Sammy had killed that ball with confidence. It soared out to left field. I jumped up and down, turned to my dad, then high fived him. But I felt like hugging him and crying out, “We saw #61! Thank you for bringing me!”

#62 was even better. This one sounded just as good, but it was soon drowned out by the fans who knew that Sammy had broken Roger Maris’s record along with Mark McGwire. There was no stopping the celebration. Players from the other team high-fived Sammy as he rounded the bases, and he never stopped smiling as he hopped from base to base. At that time, I had no idea where that ball ended up. It went out to left field, and as I found out later that there was quite a melee out back for the ball, not to mention, the set up for a law suit which happened a few months later. But the innocence of the moment was never ruined for my dad and I, as we high fived over and over again. It felt natural to be at the game, sharing it with the only other die-hard Cub fan in my life, yet it felt strange to show so much emotion in front of my father. It was a first for me to want to cry because of joy in front of him.

Yet the highlight of the game for me wasn’t even Sammy’s homeruns. Although those were hard to top. The Cubs were down in the bottom of the ninth by two. There were two runners on base, and I knew that it was going to be up to Mark Grace. I’d seen Gracie in these situations before, and as much as I loved the guy, I didn’t have a lot of confidence in him to do anything but double. Gracie has never really been a homerun hitter, but he led the majors year after year in doubles. That was good enough to tie the game, and that was all I hoped for.

I looked away for a second (never do that in the ninth inning when there is only a difference of two runs), when I heard it. I snapped my head around as I listened to that same crack that Sammy had caused twice earlier to make history. Here was Mark Grace, veteran ball

player in his mid-thirties who was consistently guessed to be retiring soon, or traded, or overshadowed by somebody on the else on the team, here was Mark Grace sending the ball to the bleachers for the win. The place went nuts. Cubs players flooded the field, carrying Gracie and Sammy on their shoulders to the delight of the Cubs die-hards at the park. And I stood on my bleacher seat, leaning on my father for leverage, hoisting my jersey over my shoulders for the world to see. My dad, giddy that his team had won, that he saw Sammy his two of the most historic home runs in history, and that his daughter got to see her favorite baseball player hit a three-run home run to win the game, pointed to my jersey and to me as if I was the lucky charm that Mark Grace needed.

The people behind us slapped my back and gave my high-fives, drenching me in beer, but I just loved the feeling that my dad wanted to show the world that his daughter's favorite ball player was Mr. Grace. He eagerly told everyone, "That's her man, she knows how to pick 'em." That nod of acknowledgement from my father was something I'd never experienced. For the first time, I'd won his approval and love through the things that he enjoyed as well.

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The celebration went on for almost a half an hour after the game was over. Nobody wanted to leave. We all cheered and danced along to the music on the PA. Eventually, but very slowly, people began filtering out. But still, spectators honked in the streets. We got to the truck having never stopped smiling. My dad wrote on another sheet of paper (I wondered where he kept coming up with this paper. I figured that we had another thing in common. Police officers and writers don't go anywhere without paper), "Sammy #61 & 62. We were there!" and he had me hold it up in the window. On I-290, he honked as I held the sign up in the window to either enthusiastic return honks or confused looks.

We beamed as we listened to report after report about how Sammy hit 61 and 62. Neither of us could wait until we got home to tell Mom about it. About how we witnessed history and how Mark Grace was the man.

“I wonder if she was watching the game,” he said to me of his wife.

“Of course, she was, Dad. She always does when we’re there,” I reminded him.

Suddenly, our conversation wasn’t forced. We laughed, joking about the things we’d seen, how we had been so lucky that day to even get tickets. He flipped back and forth on the radio listening to reports about the day. We compared notes about what we saw that day, moving on to topics we’d rarely talked about like how we felt about Chicago and what we enjoyed. It was a relief to be myself with him, to tell him about the things that I loved. Equally, it was fun to hear about him, something I knew nothing about. The coldness of sitting and staring straight ahead was gone.

Before going home, we stopped at a little place called Sluggers in Iowa City to boast about our outing. Everyone was impressed. My father was never at a loss for showing off the cool things he had done. I couldn’t blame him because not only did I pick up that trait from him, but also I felt this was definitely worth telling the world. A little drowsy from the long day and the energy I had expended at the park, I drank some Dr. Pepper to soothe my scratchy, yelled-out throat. It was already approaching eleven, and we still had an hour and half to go. When we got home, I was already half asleep (I couldn’t fight it anymore). But I was still in disbelief at all we had seen that day. My mom took the souvenir cups we had and wrote the date and the numbers 61 and 62 on the side. My dad and I followed news reports for the next few weeks as Sammy and Mark McGwire went on to shatter the record.



Since then, I've been back to Wrigley about four times. The last trip, I went with my boyfriend and pointed out to him all of the cool things about Wrigley that I noticed on that day. I showed him where we sat, about where Sammy hit the balls out, and pointed to home plate and told him how on that day, they carried Mark Grace and Sammy Sosa on their shoulders as the heroes of the game. We tried to park in the same lot that my dad and I had, tried to gaze at the right field bleachers and figure out exactly which bench it was that we sat on. I wondered how long it would be before my dad and I would make it to another game. Since I've moved away, we haven't even sat down in the same room to watch a game together. But I know my dad loves it when I call him up and ask him in the tone that only he understands, "Do the Cubs suck, or what?"

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