

Influence:  
The Linked  
Stories of *Olive Kitteridge*  
and  
Developing Creative Work

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# *Introduction*

This collection of stories stemmed from reading Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. I have worked with coauthorship in class and conducted research on the influence of the United States' government on the chronicling of Missouri history in *Missouri: A Guide to the Show Me State*. But I had not done research on influence as it occurs chronologically, over an extended period of time. "Poetic history," Bloom wrote. "Is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (5). Here, Bloom equates history with influence; writers – or in Bloom's case, poets – are influenced by their creative predecessors. Then, according to Bloom, the creative must make interpretations, adoptions, and adaptations in order to make something *fresh* and *new*.

For this project, I chose to "misread" *Olive Kitteridge*, a Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Elizabeth Strout. Strout's novel is a collection of 13 linked stories – or stories that share specific attributes but each stand alone as unique, complete tales. Linked stories build upon one another, continuing to explore the depths of characters and their actions. *Olive Kitteridge*, as a novel of linked stories, is founded and connected by two characteristics: character and setting.

First, Strout extends a character, Olive Kitteridge, throughout the novel. Olive, who teaches seventh grade math amongst a variety of other actions, is the title character and her influence can be seen in every story. "Pharmacy," which begins the novel, introduces us to Olive but as a secondary character. Another story, "Winter Concert," briefly mentions Olive as she had taught one of the characters in school. On the other

hand, Strout uses Olive as a central fixture in other stories. For example, the reader is aware of Olive's thoughts within the first few pages of "A Little Burst:" "Honestly, Olive thinks – why not just close a door nicely?" (Strout 62).

Second, Strout places the characters of *Olive Kitteridge* in the same location: Crosby, Maine. Crosby is a small, coastal town. Strout infuses characteristics of the location in stories throughout the novel. In "River," which ends the novel, Olive meets Jack Kennison on a walk along the banks of the river. Olive takes Jack to the doctor's office, where she sees Jane Houlton and comments on her attire. Jane quickly replies, "Do you know, I got this on sale at a store that was closing in Augusta" (Strout 256). Here, Strout secures the small town setting and the small town feel; action takes place near a secluded part of the river and a character's wardrobe is defined by its thrifty price. Secluded river areas and being able to take advantage of store closing and retail turnover serve as indicators of the small town coastal Maine setting.

In *Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom asserts that "every poet begins (however 'unconsciously') by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do" (10). Death, for Bloom, is a combination of the historical influence on the poet and the inevitable human end to the ability to create. Bloom works to take this assertion to another level of anxiety throughout the rest of the text. For Bloom, the main source of anxiety comes from the creator's *inability* to match the quality of his/her historical predecessors. In an updated preface in the book's second edition, Bloom uses poetry – specifically, all poetry after the work of Shakespeare – to demonstrate a consistent decline in quality to new creative work. Eventually, he argues,

new creative quality will simply be repeating the work of the predecessors. Eventually, creative quality – the *newness* and *freshness* mentioned previously – will reach null.

Originally, I had intended to provide a precursor to my creative body of work that would vehemently disagree and hopefully disprove Bloom’s argument. For me, Bloom’s ideas seemed wholly antithetical to the education process of creative writing, especially applying one’s undergraduate thesis to creating new work. “Poetry in our tradition,” wrote Bloom. “When it dies, will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength” (10). According to Bloom, merely entering my work into the genre of linked stories would contribute to its degradation. By merely writing this collection, I have sent linked stories to its creative quality grave.

Bloom takes his critique on modern creators to a holistic extreme. Unfortunately, disproving Bloom’s grad theory on poetry – and creative work in general – would be an impossible task for my sparse remaining page space. I instead found a connection with Bloom’s theory. He presents “Six Revisionary Ratios,” or the events and actions a new writer takes in order to cope with the anxiety of historical influence. Though these six acts lead to Bloom’s theory on the death of creative work, the observations he made are applicable and apparent in the creative process. One might argue my use of his revisionary process is superficial, that I use his observations as indicators of influence and not as a path to the end of new creative work. However true this may be, I cannot escape how Bloom’s observations affected my work. I believe this introduction shows how I was influenced not only by the creative work that inspired me to write linked stories, but also by the theory of influence.

Before diving into my own work, I will briefly discuss Bloom's "Six Revisionary Ratios": Clinamen, Tessera, Kenosis, Daemonization, Askesis, and Apophrades. For the purposes of this introduction, I will extrapolate Bloom's theory on *poetry* to all creative work. In other words, when Bloom refers to poetry, I am applying these theories to creative work in general.

### *Clinamen*

In this section, Bloom establishes the "swerve" or the "corrective movement" away from the predecessor (14). Bloom wrote, "The poem is *within* him, yet he experiences the same and splendor of *being found* by poems – great poems – *outside* him [author's emphasis]" (26). Bloom is referring to the inception of an idea and the subsequent creation of a body of work as originating in the creative works that came before the writer. In this case, the creator comes up with an idea based on historical influence. Then, the creator *swerves* from the past body of work to create something new. For me, this happened throughout the process of reading *Olive Kitteridge* and simultaneously creating my own collection of linked stories. Ideas *found* me as I read through Strout's novel, which translated to putting something new, something in my own creative realm, down on paper.

### *Tessera*

Bloom describes Tessera as an antithesis or "completion" of the historical influence (49). He wrote, "every good reader properly *desires* to drown, but if the poet drowns, he will become *only a reader*" (Bloom 57). To continue Bloom's metaphor, if the creator can tread water, then s/he is able to create new work; however, if the potential creator finds no room for completion, then s/he will be drowned by the power of the

historical influence. *Olive Kitteridge* is set in a small, coastal town in Maine. I saw an opportunity to complete Strout's small town setting through a regional switch. I moved the regional setting into the Midwest – central Kansas, specifically – to complete Strout's small town feeling.

### *Kenosis*

Kenosis is the breaking in repetition, according to Bloom (77). In this section, Bloom reflected on his profession (critic) and its relation to the creator. He wrote, “Critics, in their secret hearts, love continuities, but he who lives with continuity alone cannot be a poet” (78). Here, Bloom separates critics from creators while also establishing the requirement of breaking repetition in order to create something new. Again, I saw a change in regional location as an opportunity to break the repetition. I used many of the same devices as Strout to establish my linked stories: the role of a singular character throughout and a specific location. Therefore, a change in regional location becomes a break in this method of writing linked stories.

### *Daemonization*

Bloom discusses this revisionary ratio as a counter-sublime (99). Bloom describes the recognition of the “appalling energy” of the predecessor as being “independent of the will and yet is altogether conscious” (101). The potential creator recognizes the energy within which the predecessor is located as part of creative reality but not necessarily where the predecessor *should* be located. Thus, the new creator finds an opportunity to continue take the creative strand of the predecessor and place it in a new source of energy. For my work, I concentrated on the characterization of the common character. Strout's Olive becomes somewhat overbearing, often establishing herself outside of small



town energy. My common character, Danny Callaway, is *affected by* the small town way of life more so than he affects it.

### *Askesis*

Askesis is the potential creators search for independence. Bloom wrote, “The Prometheus in every strong poet incurs the guilt of having devoured just that portion of the infant Dionysus contained in the precursor poet” (115). The potential creator feels a direct influence of the predecessor and fears duplication. The potential creator realizes a niche must be carved in order to create *new* work. I carved a niche by writing about what I knew best: Midwestern small town, basketball, and the education system. This collection of stories is deeply rooted in the community of youth sports.

### *Apophrades*

Here, Bloom’s theory comes full circle. This section provides the loop back to the predecessor and the ultimate duplication of the predecessor’s work. Now, I leave it to the reader to decide my fate. How does this body of text duplicate or *continue* the tradition of linked stories established by Strout? How does this collection “swerve” from Strout’s work?

*No Drinks, Please*

It was no longer unusual for Amy to spend most of her weekends in bed. Three weeks ago, when she called in sick to work on that Friday, it seemed strange. She would eat bits and pieces of what Ian brought to her – first soup, then a sandwich or a bowl of fruit. The swiftness of her illness puzzled Ian the most. The day before had been ordinary. She wasn't feverish or vomiting and Ian couldn't remember her coughing or even sneezing for over a week. She said very little – *sick, not getting up, just tired*. He called her school and the Vice Principal Adams assured him she would cover for Amy for the day. “Hope she feels better, Mr. Burns.”

The true extent of the illness was revealed when he returned home from his school late that Friday afternoon. He went immediately to their bedroom to check on Amy and found her in the fetal position – sheets, blankets and comforter pushed off the bed – sobbing. He laid down next to her, trying to comfort. She shuddered and scooted away from him.

The rest of the weekend was a repetition of that initial moment. Amy did not want to be touched. Ian thought she might be crying harder when he was in the bedroom. He slept on the couch and called his closest friend, David, on Sunday afternoon when nothing changed. He and David met their sophomore year at the University of Kansas, both recent transfers into the education program. David finished got his bachelor's in elementary education and went on to get his master's in educational psychology.

“I think she's depressed, Ian.”

“I know, man. What do I do?”

“She's got to talk to someone. If not you, then I don't know. Maybe–”

“You mean she needs to talk to a doctor, a psychiatrist?”

Amy didn't make it out of bed Monday morning, either. Her school had notified a few substitutes in anticipation of a lengthy illness. Ian decided he would look into finding a psychiatrist after he finished working. To his surprise, Amy was sitting at the kitchen table thumbing through a *Better Homes and Gardens*. She looked pale and thin, but she had showered and she smiled at him. A big, big smile. They talked about Amy and sadness and that feeling of complete emptiness until it was fully dark and Ian's stomach groaned. She wasn't shy about it – openly used “depression” to describe the weekend. Ian didn't bring up looking for a psychiatrist. David had said she should talk to “someone.” She was talking to him. At least for now.

The following Friday Amy and Ian went to work as usual. The previous weekend seemed to be behind them until Amy returned home. Ian had beat her back to their cozy, rural two-bedroom house. She was a few minutes late but not unusually so. Ian had begun to prep dinner, boiling water for angel hair pasta, shrimp and a peppery alfredo sauce. Amy ignored Ian, imminent dinner, and the front door she left standing open. Ian brought up talking to a psychiatrist the next day. Amy ignored him until Sunday afternoon, reluctantly agreeing to make an appointment with a psychiatrist. Ian had researched a few offices in Manhattan, less than a half an hour away. He wrote a name – Jenn Allisen – and number on a piece of notebook paper and left it on Amy's laptop. Writing it on a piece of paper felt less overbearing.

Two weeks later, Amy still had not seen anyone nor had she called to make an appointment. The paper Ian left on her laptop sat on Amy's desk. The symptoms of her depression were far less severe than that first weekend. She hadn't missed any more

work. She ate dinner on most weeknights. She would get out of bed, occasionally, on the weekends. The weekends were, however, the worst. Amy slept until noon and lay in bed for hours after. She would get up to eat leftovers from the prior week and move to the living room couch. She no longer contributed to cleaning, cooking, or grocery shopping. She cried at night, often waking Ian up with silent, rhythmic fits of tears.

Ian returned to the house he and his wife occupied with bags of groceries. He generally hated grocery shopping, not because he felt it was below him or challenged his masculinity but rather he hated not feeling alone. He was sure to run into someone that knew him or Amy in line for deli meat. The woman behind the customer service desk – Dedra Moon – would surely turn up her nose after he bought a carton of Marlboros. Ian had fled his family in suburban Minneapolis for the education program in Lawrence. He had thought the move to rural Kansas, further removed from civilization, would provide solitude. Instead, it felt like the entire community knew about his every move.

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After graduating from KU, Ian dove deeper into rural Kansas. He applied for jobs at school districts in towns with fewer than 1,000 people. The first offer, which Ian readily accepted, came from Riley County High School to teach world history to freshmen and sophomores and U.S. government to juniors and seniors. The state of Kansas officially referred to Riley County High as Unified School District 378. USD 378 was located in Riley but served kids living within several dozen square miles of the town;

one bus route lasted nearly an hour and a half from first pick up to delivering the students to the high school.

In his first semester, Ian went through training and certification to drive a school bus. His teaching schedule prevented him from taking morning and afternoon routes, but he picked up athletic events and certain field trips. These trips often involved late nights but were fairly simple and afforded him certain benefits: the district paid weekend and nighttime bus drivers well, drivers were admitted into events free of charge, and meals at many restaurants – even fast-food joints like Sonic and McDonalds – were on the house. Driving bus trips also allowed Ian to develop a rapport with many of his students. All of his trips required a coach or sponsor of some sort so Ian didn't have to take on the role of the authority figure, which made the extra work manageable and opened up opportunities to become closer to the other teachers. In fact, driving bus trips led Ian to Amy.

Ian drove the RCHS Eagles and Lady Eagles to the district championship game in early March of his first year. Ian had wondered why girls' sports teams often added the feminine adjective since his high school sports' days. Boys' teams weren't *Man* Eagles. "Lady Eagles" invoked an image of an older woman with high cheekbones, a long pointy nose, and slicked back grey hair whose body quickly became feathery below the neckline, wings where arms should be. He thought about this Lady Eagle puncturing a basketball with its talons, air whooshing out.

The Eagles played the Pottawatomie County Mustangs who, of course, also referred to their girls' team as the Lady Mustangs. The boys and girls of Riley and Pottawatomie County had played for the district title three years in a row; the high school's had expansive school districts encompassing thousands of acres of farmland and

farmer's children, many who hoped to get out of rural Kansas by playing ball. The school's met at a neutral gymnasium outside Fort Riley on a cold, drizzly Friday night. The stands were packed with students, faculty, and a myriad of recruiters from small colleges across the state. One recruiter wore the purple of Kansas State and scribbled furious notes and statistics each time Danny Callaway touched the ball, set a pick, or picked his nose. Danny played forward for Pottawatomie County; he was Pottawatomie County boys basketball. A Manhattan newspaper profiled the athlete – an obvious ploy to draw his attention to Kansas State. In the article, Danny referenced losing to Riley County his sophomore and junior year. He made his intentions known in pre-game warm-ups by throwing the ball off the backboard, turning his body, and dunking the ball behind his head. The Pottawatomie students jumped and screamed and clapped; the officials gave Danny a warning, as dunking in high school was a technical foul, which brought the students to a tangible fervor.

The Lady Eagles beat the Lady Mustangs by 19. Ian left his perch at the top of the bleachers after Danny's pre-game for Gatorade and popcorn. This game promised to be more entertaining and he didn't want to miss any of it. Predictably, many of the other attendees had the same idea and Ian missed the first 2 minutes. He hurried across the cafeteria floor, juggling a bag of steaming popcorn in the crook of his arm to open his Gatorade. As he approached the entrance to the gymnasium, a woman's voice halted him. He turned to see a young woman pointing to a sign posted to the right of the doorframe: **No Drinks in the Gymnasium, Please.** Ian placed the cap back on the Gatorade bottle and mumbled a curt thank you.

“They’ll yell at you,” the woman said. “Or at least they yelled at me. I was just trying to save you the trouble.”

She shuffled closer to Ian and the entrance. He noticed she had a blue paper Pepsi cup. She took a sip and turned her eyes to the game.

“Thank you,” Ian said again, this time with a smile. “My name is Mr. Burns – Ian Burns. I teach history and government at Riley.”

“I’m Amy. I teach special ed at P.C.” Amy pointed to the Pottawatomie team’s bench. “That’s Nathan. He’s the team manager. He’s one of mine.”

Ian followed her finger and saw Nathan hand one of the boys a towel and plastic bottle. Nathan had downs syndrome.

“How long have you taught at Pottawatomie?”

“All my life,” she laughed. Ian raised an eyebrow.

“Well, I haven’t taught all my life. I should say I’ve been at P.C. all my life – grew up there, went to school there.”

Ian smiled, “You’re a local girl.”

Amy finished her drink and slipped Ian’s Gatorade into her canvass bag. The duo waited for a break in the game – Danny was fouled hard on a breakaway layup – and squeezed into a space near the wall. Danny went to the free throw line, quieting the crowd with a hand motion. The official bounced Danny the ball and he took a deep breath. Then, the rain picked up. It sounded like thousands of marbles were rolling and skittering across the roof of the gymnasium. Danny looked up at the ceiling, smiled, and sank both free throws increasing the Mustangs’ lead to 4. After halftime, the roof began to leak. Gymnasium staffers would run on the court and mop up wet spots with towels



after fouls and during timeouts. The wet spots increased in number and in size as the game wore, which required longer delays. During one exceptionally long one late in the fourth quarter, Ian snuck his Gatorade from Amy's bag and took a drink. This time, she raised an eyebrow at him. He shrugged in the direction of a man kneeling on the court furiously whipping his towel in circles. They laughed. Amy put the bottle back in her bag and placed her hand on Ian's knee. Her hand stayed there until the game resumed.

Danny's Mustangs won by 14 points. The game wasn't as entertaining as Ian had hoped it would be, but that didn't seem to matter to him as he started the school bus and pulled it around to the locker room entrance. He had Amy's number saved in his cell phone and she had promised to see him again. And soon.

Ian and Amy were engaged late that summer. They married over winter break, bought a house and moved in together, and took a four-day winter cruise all before the second semester started. Each loved the other. If you asked them or anyone in rural central Kansas, life just felt *right*, like the days could go on for eternity just the way they were. Amy's depression surfaced just after their one-year anniversary, just long enough to make Ian think he could live the rest of his life in happiness, without a single hiccup, but just short enough to make him question everything prior to that weekend. Was all that happiness a front to keep something else buried deep inside? Did he know Amy as well as he thought he did, thought he should, or was he about to meet a totally new Amy?

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Now, over a month since Amy's first weekend of bedridden depression, Ian began to lose trust in his wife. She would not see anyone, though Amy insisted she would every time Ian brought up the issue of a psychiatrist. Their nighttime conversations quickly began to lose depth and dimension. Ian felt his wife becoming a cracked, empty shell – one he would surely toss back into the dark ocean if he found it lying on the beach. He felt the structure of their life together changing; it seemed as though this – a sad and, quite frankly, boring monotony – was and would be their new life. Before, Ian was able to embrace rural Kansas. At times, he thought he might be taking advantage of rural life, forcing the unwilling area to give him the solitude it kept hidden away for the privileged. Ian now saw a knowing look in the community's eyes; people knew he was helpless and they judged him for it. When his life had been full of Amy, the community didn't take notice of him. When they were happy, they didn't need anyone else and no one needed them. Except, that wasn't necessarily true. The kids. The kids, the kids. How could he forget about the kids?

Ian's fifth period U.S. government class was currently covering the judicial branch and law enforcement – the last section of the course before the U.S. Constitution test. Ian planned for the students to complete a series of homework assignments and quizzes followed by a mock trial, which would require the students to assume the various roles of the courtroom and demonstrate their knowledge on the functionality of the judiciary system. The class had recently completed an assignment on the various types of crimes and levels of punishment. The class discussed the homework and started to talk about justification for certain types of punishment. One student knocked out the obvious: removing dangerous individuals from society. After a few comments about the value of

human life, the discussion trailed off and the class grew quiet. Ian posed a new question: what about crimes that don't necessarily hurt people?

"You mean like stealing and money and fraud, right?" Lacey Nefton said.

"Stealing hurts people. If I stole all your money, you wouldn't be able to buy things you needed," said a boy in the back of the classroom.

Lacey quickly countered, "Yeah, but stealing all my money doesn't put me in danger right away. Like, if you steal all my money, you going to jail doesn't protect me. It protects my money."

Ian smiled and acknowledged Lacey's point. She was a studious little junior. Ian was sure the other students had labeled her as a nerd – among many other things – a long time ago.

A third student brought up justice; if the boy in the back stole all of Lacey's money, then sending him to jail was teaching him – and anyone else who wanted to steal – a lesson.

"What about the people who don't really care?" Lacey asked. "What about the people who do bad things for fun, who break the law for the thrill of it?"

The boy in the back sneered. "People don't just do terrible things for kicks. Those people are messed up in the head or something."

He waited for Lacey to begin her explanation then interrupted her. "Some people are just—" He made a low whistling sound and twirled an extended forefinger around his ear. He laughed, which invited the rest of the class to join in. Ian let the laughter die down and said, "I think I know what you mean, Lacey. Go on."

“Um, well. Sometimes people do bad things because they think it’s entertaining. Like, in this one...” Lacey trailed off and nervously swept her curly hair behind her ear. The class waited in silence. Ian nodded at her, beckoning her to continue.

“Ok. So, there’s this comic book.” Lacey cleared her throat. Ian watched as the classes’ eyes collectively widened and the boy in the back began to giggle. “There’s this comic book and the people in it – well, the Thanagarians – don’t need police in the beginning because they don’t want to or can’t really hurt each other. Then, the Manhawks arrive and show the Thanagarians that stealing can be fun, like a rush. And then, they need police to so along come Hawkman and Hawkwoman. They weren’t crazy. They just didn’t know better and someone had to show them it was still wrong and bad by punishing them.”

The class was quite, dumbfounded or otherwise. Ian smiled, “I think that’s a great example. I’ll have to check that out. Hawkwoman, you said?”

Lacey nodded quickly, ready to take her quiz and get to sixth period.

Ian rushed home that afternoon and Googled “Hawkwoman.” As Ian had guessed, Hawkwoman was half-bird, half-woman. She married Hawkman and the duo saved Earth from their corrupted people. They were ostracized from Thanagar, forever known as traitors. Ten minutes into his research, Ian heard Amy’s engine whine as she parked her car in their driveway. She came in, sat down next to him, and laid her head against the couch. Her eyes closed and she sighed.

“Are you OK?” Ian asked.

He watched her eyes roll under their lids. Amy swallowed hard and opened her eyes. They were bleary. The muscles in her throat worked to swallow an imaginary lump and she began to cry.

“What am I doing, Amy?”

She shook her head.

“What am I *not* doing, then?”

She continued to shake her head.

Ian warily placed his hand on her back and caressed her shoulder blades with his fingertips. She cried softly for several minutes while Ian rubbed her back.

“I can’t help these kids,” she said.

Ian, unsure of what to say, scooted closer to her, pulling her into him under his arm.

“I think they hate me. I think they know I can’t do anything for them and they hate me for it.”

“You do more for them than anyone else, Amy. You might be their only hope.”

Ian winced at his overly dramatic reaction. Amy let out a yelp and clutched her thighs as though something had stung her there. She kneaded her thighs with the heels of her hands, then with closed fists.

“Ian, I can’t live with myself. I can’t stand feeling so helpless when it is my *job* to help them.”

His eyes fell away from his sobbing wife and onto an image of Hawkwoman soaring through a blue sky. He thought about Hawkwoman’s heart; she tried to protect her people against themselves, and then saved the Earthlings from being destroyed by her

people. Did she know how grateful those Earthlings must have been? What did it take to stand up for the weak against the unjust?

# *Cook and Capture*

His cowhide Tony Lama boots shuffled and circled around her pigeon-toed feet. She stood stationary, giggling into her palm, which covered a wet, toothy grin. The whiskey flushed her face, nearly as maroon as her plaid, western top. In his left hand, he held a small, translucent plastic cup. Ice and a slice of lime sloshed in circles, flirting with the rim, as Danny danced in circles like one does after leaving sobriety behind.

Danny turned quickly extend a line in a chorus he was not too drunk to forget. He turned sharply again to return his gaze to Melissa. His drink hand clipped the hip of a squat man returning to the bar to refresh his rocks glass. The plastic cup collapsed in on itself, spraying vodka and tonic and ice across the heavily waxed wooden dance floor a few feet behind the farmer. The man checked his blue jeans for spillage, tipped his green John Deere hat, and murmured condolences for Danny's loss. The quarter lime wedge lay in the tiny puddle of vodka tonic remaining in the overturned cup. Danny picked up the plastic cup. He swung and shook the cup in frustration, which caused its leftover contents to splatter Melissa.

"C'mon, man," Danny shouted. "A guy hears a song and a guy wants to dance. I don't need you telling me what to do with my drink. John Deere – lookin' at your hat, man."

Danny's slurred speech left the farmer, the bar's dozen patrons and staff, and Melissa feeling unimpressed. He drew out the vowels in the last word of each sentence and paused for an uncomfortably long amount of time to observe the farmer's hat. Melissa secured a few stray curls behind her small, pink ears and walked to the bar to tab out.



“Maître d’,” Danny caught the attention of Melissa and the bartender. Maître d’ sounded more like “mattered” in Danny’s drunken speech. “That’s French for fucking look at me.” Spittle jetted out his mouth. Some collected on his bottom lip. “Put the lady on my tab, maître d’.”

“Does your uncle know he keeps you and any available female that walks across this bar boozed up seven nights a week?” Melissa’s face darkened even more –darker than her plaid shirt now. She scrambled to place a wad of dirty small-bills on the bar; then, she rushed out the door and onto Morgan Street.

“Burner. You know nothing about me ‘n’ my uncle. Never will.” Danny worked to compose himself, tried too hard to walk straight and upright, and approached the bar. He calmly pulled out his wallet, which matched his cowhide boots, and placed three twenty dollar bills on the bar.

“Burnett, ‘cause that’s your name, you take this. And you don’t talk about me or my uncle again. Least not now – not around me.”

Burnett Wader nodded his head and slid the cash off the bar. “Who’s taking you home tonight, Danny?”

Danny pulled a thick ring of keys from his pockets, jingling them in Burnett’s direction. “Tabbed out and driving home, partner.”

He turned away from Burnett and took special care to control his steps as he walked out the door. It was summer and the humid Kansas air tricked Danny’s skin; warm, sickening goosebumps crawled over him. Danny punched the unlock key on his pickup’s keyless entry pad half a dozen times. He sat for a moment, staring down at his Tony Lama’s, listening to the late-night radio host hand the show off to the late-late-night

host. In one fluid motion, Danny was out of his truck, planting his right foot square in the middle of a wooden sign: Prairie Creek Park. His heel cracked through the weathered wood and stuck. He removed it with a tug, which cut deep into the heel of his boot. He kicked again with the right, then with the left, over and over again until two posts stood naked. Splinters and chunks of wood lay in the grass around the posts. The Tony Lamas were scraped, torn, and scuffed.

The big diesel's door slammed behind him and he threw the truck into reverse, scalding the pavement with his knobby tires. Less than 100 yards later, Danny's truck was parked on the side of the road, illuminated by the red, blue, and white lights of the Pottawatomie County deputy sheriff's patrol car.

"What do you think you're doing here, son?" The deputy sheriff jogged to Danny's window. He spoke loudly, but his intimidation was corrupted by his breathiness. "Saw you kick the shit out of that sign. Is that your property – no? How many drinks you have tonight, son?"

Danny slipped his sunflower state driver's license and proof of insurance from the visor, poking it at the deputy's golden badge. The deputy asked Danny to remain in the car and ran his license.

"You're Brady Callaway's nephew – Bingo's boy?"

"Yes-sir." Danny tried to hide the quiver in his voice and keep his eyes from wandering. He considered running. Then, he fought the urge to cry and plead with the officer. The deputy asked Danny to step out of the vehicle for a few field sobriety tests, which he failed, after a few mundane questions about his drinking habits. Danny refused a Breathalyzer and was taken to a holding cell at the county barracks before being driven

to the Fort Riley hospital to have his blood drawn. His uncle paid a lawyer to tell him what he already knew: the blood test results would be well over the legal limit and fighting the procedures in court would lead to harsher sentencing. Danny plead guilty and cut a first offender deal. He would be sentenced to 100 hours of community service, receive a DUI, and attend a substance abuse class. The judge expunged the property destruction charges under the promise of good behavior and a donation to the parks' service, which Danny's uncle covered.

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A crowd of small children gathered on the Pottawatomie County Elementary asphalt basketball court. One of the cooking instructors, a forty-something chef from Bluestem Bistro in Manhattan, stood against a propped door. She slipped a navy Bluestem apron off her neck and threw it over her shoulder, flipping her hair over the opposite shoulder.

Danny dribbled around two bold youngsters, weaving and slipping the basketball around their small bodies. He passed the ball to himself through the legs of a thin, blonde boy sending all of the children running, laughing, and shouting across the small playground. Danny turned back to the boy, holding the ball out to him with one hand. The boy took it, Danny grabbed him at his hips, and lifted him to the rim. He hung with one hand, waving to his friends with the other. Danny stood under him, ready to catch him if he fell.

The little crowd had gathered again. They began to chant: “Dunk it, drunk it, drunk-dunk-dunk!” Danny helped the boy off the rim and picked up the ball. He began to dribble the ball in rhythm with the children’s chants; he was working the group into an overexcited fervor. Suddenly, Danny turned, threw the ball off the backboard, and dunked it with his left hand. He seemed to float above the rim, more so guiding the ball through the hoop instead of slamming it. The ball was an extension of his arm and he treated it with the respect a part of the human body warrants. He did not hang on the rim. He did not act with contempt or anger. The ball was always his, a part of him. It was meant to fall through the net.

The chef leaned further out of the doorway to yell to the kids. It was nearly parent pick up time. Danny scooped up the ball and ran toward the open door. The kids quickly followed, racing Danny for the door. The mob, Danny more or less in the lead, skittered to a stop several feet into the tiled hallway. Liz Manning – the chef – crossed her arms and looked on with disapproval.

“Please don’t run in the hallway,” she said, eyes fixed on Danny. He smiled and, standing feet above the kids, sheepishly rolled his eyes at her. Liz directed the students to the cafeteria, where they sniffed at their cooling pies.

Danny hung back to walk with the chef. “Parents aren’t supposed to arrive for twenty minutes, Miss Manning.”

“I can’t have you showing off to all the kids.” She grinned, turning her face away from him. “They’ll think you’re cooler than me.”

“Oh, big mistake.” They both laughed.

“I have to leave anyway, Liz,” Danny said. “Thanks for being cool with me leaving early on Wednesdays, by the way.”

“I mean, you have to do what you have to do.”

“I do what *they* tell me to do, actually.”

Liz stopped walking, her eyes now locked into Danny’s.

“You don’t think you should be punished do you? This is all just really silly, right? You’re young and you’re a man and you don’t need any help.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I know.”

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As the Kansas summer waned, so did Danny’s remaining community service hours. He had been volunteering at the Kids’ Kitchen five days a week, three hours an afternoon for almost six weeks. He mostly worked as an extra pair of hands and eyes for the teachers and cooking instructors the program hired. The Kid’s Kitchen taught summer school kids at Pottawatomie Count Elementary School to value locally grown foods, basic cooking skills (cutting and cleaning vegetables, safely using a stovetop, the properties of yeast and flour, etc.), and to take pride in what their unique learning processes.

Each week, the kids would sign up to “capture” or “cook” during various cooking projects. Capturers were responsible for filming and editing short cooking “shows,” which documented the entire process. Cooks were responsible for gathering the food,

preparing, and cooking dishes while hosting the “show.” At the end of the summer, the instructors compile the short videos and invite student parents, friends, and community members who sponsored projects. The program was born from a coalition of influential members of the food service industry and small, local farmers. They intended to create a generation of Kansans who valued locally produced food. They hoped the kids’ excitement would inspire locals to do the same, but the families of rural Pottawatomie County still flocked to Riley and Manhattan to buy precooked, frozen chicken tenders from Wal Mart.

Danny, on the other hand, had been affected. Not quite in the way the creators of the Kids’ Kitchen might have hoped but something had happened, nonetheless. Danny had been offered several scholarships to play basketball at colleges all across the Midwest; an assistant coach at KU had even spoken to his family at the end of his junior year, promising a workout and meeting with the Jayhawks’ head coach.

But Danny’s confident, small town celebrity would betray him. Everyone within thirty miles of Pottawatomie County High thought Danny would be the rural Kansas boy to extend the championship legacy of the state’s flagship university. Those who were less inclined to buy the boy a drink had no reservations selling him one. After his junior season, Danny was frequenting several bars in Riley. He took out tabs in hundreds of dollars, which his uncle paid off without question. He began sleeping with women, some twice his age. And he started to miss school.

He took the ACT twice – still drunk from the night before the first time, more desperate and frustrated the second. Each time, he scored fell several points short of major university minimums. Within days of receiving his second score, Danny fielded

calls from every university that had offered him a scholarship. Most were encouraging. Some even emailed lists of the best basketball junior colleges, or at least the ones they recruited from. A few simply left a message on his dad's answering machine wishing Danny "best of luck" in the future. Not surprisingly, this latter list included Kansas.

Danny's uncle created the first ever "Brady Callaway's Concrete and Construction Junior Collegiate Scholarship" to send Danny to a junior college in northern Oklahoma. The money may as well have been handed to Danny, tied together with a big red bow. After just two weeks of fall practice, Danny walked out on the junior college and drove home. The scholarship money was appropriated for community college use – they didn't bother to name it this time – and Danny was enrolled in the construction management associates program at Pottawatomie County Community College.

But now, Danny wasn't sure what he wanted to do. His Uncle Brady had given him a cushion chair management position in July after only two months working on sites. Danny's work ethic had been strong; he enjoyed manual labor. And Danny had always tried his best to impress his uncle. Lately, he found himself ignoring his father. It was quite simple: Brady Callaway was a wealthy, successful businessman who adorned his nephew with money and well-paying positions he didn't deserve nor was he qualified for; Bingo Callaway was a simple, small town Kansan who enjoyed carving and sitting in a John boat in the middle of his lake. His father wanted very little and expected even less, so when Danny began to spend his time working with his uncle or at the bars, Bingo accepted the loss of his son as he had done for his wife. Becky Callaway had been killed by a drunk driver when Danny was eight. She was returning from her sister's house just south of Manhattan. Just after 11:00 PM, a car crested the hill in front of her, traveling

south in the northbound lane of Highway 177. It was a head on collision. Both vehicles had been traveling at over 60 miles per hour. Both drivers died on impact.

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“I think I want to teach,” Danny said.

“Really? I’m glad you want to stay involved with the program,” Liz said. “Did you want to be a cooking instructor or a program director? Do you have experience?”

Danny sat back and smiled. Liz gave him a quizzical look over the rim of her Styrofoam coffee cup.

“I mean, I want to teach. Like, ‘Hey, Mr. Callaway. Can you help me with this math problem?’”

“You work with kids for two and a half months and you decide you want to be teacher?”

“I really want to coach, too. Maybe you don’t understand. I started playing basketball when I was in grade school. Real young – right after mom died.”

Danny paused to give one of the Kids’ Kitchen kids a high five as he jogged passed. The Kids’ Kitchen Dinner Finale had ended nearly an hour ago, but a few of the kids’ parents were friends with Mr. Adelaide, the assistant principal at the elementary school and one of a Kids’ Kitchen founder.

Danny met Liz’s eyes again, “Those coaches were like extended family. I wouldn’t have left my room without them.”

“It’s not going to be easy. You’ll have to go back to school.”



“I’m in school.”

Liz snorted.

“I am in school. Just as much as you were.”

“I have two bachelor’s degrees and I’m going back for my MBA in the fall.” Liz placed her hands on her hips and looked through Danny. “Excuse me,” she said, trying to brush passed Danny.

“Liz.” Danny reached for her hand. He locked his fingers in hers. “I’m sorry, but I am in school – so, it’s not fair to say I’m not.”

They stood like that, fingers laced together.

“You’re right,” Liz said. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I need references. I need – well, I’m not really sure what to do.”

Liz pulled her hand from his, then grabbed Danny by the shoulders, embracing him. Danny’s face flushed. He wanted to tell Liz things he didn’t think she wanted to hear. He wanted to cry. He did neither.

*Through Hardship to  
the Stars*

Little girls, faces flushed red, surrounded Eric. The tallest, Justine, was only as tall as his armpit, but he had always been the tallest of his friends. Less than a minute remained in the fourth quarter and these girls were tired. The fourth and fifth grade Pottawatomie County Girls Youth Basketball League only played six-minute quarters, but Karl's Heating & Air Conditioning Lady Jets were missing three players. The county health center gave free flu shots this year. Eric cursed the parents of the missing girls for not taking their children to be immunized. He cursed the school district for being too poor to provide flu shot clinics.

"OK, girls," Eric said. "Here's what we're going to do." He uncapped the black dry erase marker Velcroed to his small dry erase board. He wrote, "One," just above the half court line on the board. At the beginning of the season, Eric used a board without the basketball court already drawn on it. Each time he had attempted to draw the half court markings in order to show the girls a play, they would giggle and whisper to each other. Evidently, Eric's three-second lane, free throw line, and top of the key sketching looked a lot like a penis. Evidently, fourth and fifth grade girls already had a rough idea what a penis, or at least a drawing of a penis, should look like.

"One," he said while writing. His pep talk sounded like a string of one word sentences. "Play. Defense. Two. Don't. Foul. Three. Win. This. Game."

The Lady Jets were up two points. The girls had led by fourteen at halftime and should have won the game easily, but with only one player on the bench, the Lady Buffaloes had outran them for the last quarter. Luckily, the Lady Buffaloes coach had called a timeout to draw up a play, which allowed Eric's girls to catch their breath.

The girls broke the huddle with a simultaneous “Win!” and jogged onto their half of the court. Two Lady Buffaloes jogged to the opposite end to inbound the ball while the rest walked into position amongst the Lady Jets. Eric’s girls would make their stand on his side of the court. He stood and paced the bench.

“Coach,” said the little girl behind him. “I can’t see. Sit down.”

Eric smiled and sat down next to his daughter. “Whadya think?” he said, motioning with his left hand to the girl dribbling the ball down to his waiting time.

“We got it. They can’t shoot and nobody’s getting’ past Justine,” Erica said. Erica was a fantastic shooter. She forced youth coaches to teach their girls to guard someone beyond the three-point arc, which was rare. She was a little slow on her feet and had played quite a few minutes already; so, she sat next to her dad and stamped her feet and chanted “D-D-D-Defense!” Most important, she was a wonderful daughter. This wasn’t the first time, nor would it be the last, she sat next to her father and cheered.

The Lady Jet’s defense collapsed on each Lady Buffalo that tried to dribble down to the basket. Eventually, the clock on the First Baptist Church’s gymnasium scoreboard ticked below ten seconds. The Lady Buffalo’s coach began yelling, “Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!” One little girl threw the ball up from fifteen feet away and it careened off the backboard. Justine’s long, thin arms stretched above the other girls and caught the ball. She held it tightly between her hands as the clock expired.

Several dozen parents and siblings stood and clapped. Some yelled – Justine’s parents especially so. The teams exchanged post-game sportsmanship and the little girls dispersed into the crowd of parents. Eric and Erica meandered through the crowd to exchange pleasantries and congratulations but didn’t stay long. They would see everyone

again next Saturday and at practice on Tuesday and Thursday evening. Eric's time with his daughter was limited and it was precious.

In Eric's truck, a four-year-old flatbed dually with a heavy-duty trailer hitch, Erica asked her father if they could go to Tuttle Creek Lake and look for geese.

"How about we get out washed up and fed and then we'll see about the geese?" Eric slipped his whistle off his neck and around the rearview mirror. The truck came to life with a belch of black, diesel smoke. He let the truck idle for a moment before slipping it into first and pulling out of his spot at the rear of the church's gravel parking lot.

"Hey, dad," Erica interrupted his nirvana-like trance within which he had been since he left his farm that morning. "Mom doesn't want to buy me new basketball shoes and the back is coming off these. Look."

Erica pulled a white sneaker from her gym bag and handed to her father. Eric set the sneaker in his lap to pull onto the two-lane highway. Then, he held it above the steering wheel so he could keep the truck straight with his wrists and peer around the shoe to see the road. Eric separated the heel of the shoe, her left shoe, by half an inch with his thumb.

Eric said, "I told you. You can't keep taking these sneakers off with your other foot like that. Ruins the heel."

He handed the shoe back to her. She held it for a moment before placing it back into the gym bag.

“I think I have some super glue in the shop back home. We can glue the heel on and leave it dry ‘til Tuesday. It’ll get you through the rest of the season and we’ll get you new sneakers for next year.”

Eric groped for a can of Skoal that had slid to the passenger side of the dashboard. Erica watched him struggle for a moment before reaching it for him. He dipped, sucked, and spit into a Gatorade bottle he bought before the game.

“Gross,” Erica said. Eric wasn’t sure if she was referring to the tobacco or to the idea of having a super-glued shoe for the rest of the season.

“It’s just a few more weeks, sweetheart. And I promise the shoe will –”

“That stuff makes me sick, daddy,” she interrupted again. “I just don’t want to see all the black gunk.”

Eric placed the bottle between his legs so she couldn’t see the runny, black spit accumulate at its bottom. The nicotine ran through his gums and into his brain. The feeling calmed him until he reached the farm. While his daughter showered, Eric made pizza rolls. They sat and watched Kansas State play Colorado. Eric grew up a Jayhawks fan, but watched K-State games with his daughter. Erica’s mother, Emma, in the MBA program at Kansas State and Erica had become a big fan. He didn’t mind talking about his ex-wife; in fact, he felt that strengthened his relationship with Erica. He was sure conversations involving him were scarce at Emma’s house. He imagined Emma rolling her eyes and changing the conversation while Erica talked about wanting to see geese or play in the hay barn. He imagined Emma sweeping hair behind her ear and asking Erica if she wanted to get ice cream from the new place downtown.

Later that afternoon, Eric took Erica to Tuttle Creek Lake. The Kansas winter had been icy and frigid cold. This Saturday, however, showed signs of something warmer, something better. Eric pulled his truck into the short driveway of Bingham Callaway, one of his high school classmates and still one of his best friends, and hopped out. Bingo, the name he was dubbed their junior year of high school when he knocked up Rebecca Gamble after just one sexual encounter, wasn't home. Bingo married Becky after they graduated and moved her and their son to the lake house. His son Danny, now a junior in high school, nearly fell out the front door.

"Eric," he yelled. "Where ya been at, ol' man? Well, how are ya, Erica? Jeez, you sure have sprouted up. What are you and your daddy doin' out here today?"

Father and daughter stood dumbfounded by the barrage of questions, unsure which to answer first. The lanky country boy laughed so hard he clutched at his side in pain and snot dripped off the tip of his nose. Erica giggled at the boy's fit of laughter; then, she ran over and hugged him.

"Danny, you gotta boogy."

This caused him to laugh harder and deeper than before. He went to one knee and whipped a handkerchief from his back pocket to blow his nose. Erica perched on Danny's skinny, bent knee and smiled at her father.

"Leave the poor boy to catch his breath before ya go and kill 'im," Eric said to Erica. She rolled her eyes, still beaming a warm smile, and stood next to Danny. Danny stood, pocketed his kerchief and extended a hand to Eric.

"What brings ya out to the lake, Eric?"

“Erica wanted to watch for geese. Truth is, I think she just wanted to stay off the farm. Nothin’ out there but cold dirt and a few trees.”

“Ain’t nothin’ here but cold water and a few trees. I ain’t seen geese yet. Still early in the spring. Or late in the winter.”

The man and boy talked about the harshness of the winter, impending spring, and other obligatory barometric babble. Tuttle Creek Lake looked cold and still stretched out behind the Callaway’s lake house. The stillness is a deception as the creek creates a slight current as it runs through the lake.

Danny hadn’t put on a jacket or shoes when he came outside and, though late February seemed to promise spring, the boy began to shiver. Eric told him to go inside.

“Well, alright Eric. I guess me ‘n dad ain’t going to charge a pretty little girl and an ol’ man for a view.” The boy began to laugh again and even Eric smiled.

Bingo had built a twenty-foot dock after moving his family to the lake. On that dock, he built two wooden chairs, one slightly smaller than the other, for himself and his growing son. Bingo connected with wood like Picasso did with paint. Bingo worked as a carpenter in Manhattan. His truly amazing work, the work that made the payments on the lake house, was performed with a chain saw. Bingo was a chain saw sculptor. Each year at the Kansas State Fair his work grossed tens of thousands of dollars. Three years ago, the year of Eric’s divorce, the state of Kansas commissioned Bingo to carve the image of the Kansas state seal on a cross section of pine three feet in diameter. Bingo took Eric to the capitol building for the unveiling; just two short weeks after Eric’s divorce became final. The symbol is as detailed and beautiful as the friezes of Ancient Greece. Bingo had used a hammer and chisel for some of the more minute details, but he carved the state



motto, *Ad Astra per Aspera*, in with the saw. Bingo often joked about how the state motto, which means “Through hardships to the stars,” reflected the process of carving the seal all too well. It was and still is the most beautiful thing Eric had ever seen. It made Bingo 7,000 dollars.

The father took the daughter out onto the dock and she sat in the slightly smaller chair. He told her he forgot something in the truck. He returned with two green thermoses full of hot chocolate. The little girl in the slightly smaller chair found marshmallows in hers.

“Daddy, when do you think the geese will come back?”

“Not sure. Are you cold?” The sun had disappeared below the tree line and Eric could see his breath in the twilight. Any ice left on the trees and sidewalks melted during the day, but the lake became bitter cold without the sunshine. Erica shook her head and sipped hot cocoa.

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Bingo’s 1997 Ford Lariat crawled up Eric’s long, narrow gravel driveway. It was mid-summer and hot. Eric sat in a plastic lawn chair in his yard with Skoal dripping from his lip and a bottle of Jim Beam between his feet. He felt indifferent to his friend’s approaching truck, indignant at the humidity and bitter smell coming from his armpits. He was just becoming drunk and the afternoon was only half an hour old.

“You look like shit, cowboy” Bingo said as he strode across the lawn.

Eric spit tobacco juice and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“Are ya going to at least offer me a dip and a drink?”

“What are you gettin’ at calling me ‘cowboy?’ I haven’t roped since high school.”

Bingo looked around as if a rodeo corral had once existed just beyond the yard.

He looked down at Eric again and sighed.

“I told ya I was coming today,” Bingo said quietly. “Meant to pick ya up and head to Topeka. They’re unveilin’ my flag.”

“Must have forgot.” Eric reached for the whiskey at his feet, but Bingo poked the neck of the bottle with the tip of his boot. The bottle tipped over spilling whiskey into the grass.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Eric scooped up the leaking bottle and stood up quickly.

Whiskey and heat buzzed in his ears. “I know what you told me about today. I apologize. I don’t think I can make it.”

Eric turned on his boot heel toward his porch but did not walk away from Bingo. He let his chin fall to his chest and said he was sorry again. Bingo stood beside him and slipped the whiskey from his hand. He took a pull from the bottle.

“You ain’t got to apologize to me.”

Eric stared at the ground, fighting the alcohol and lump in his throat.

“Go get showered up and come with me. I ain’t gotta be there ‘til four o’clock anyway.”

Half an hour later, Bingo and Eric were speeding down Highway 13 headed toward Manhattan where they would pick up Highway 177 to I-70 to Topeka. The drive would only take an hour and a half and the men preferred to take it with the windows down and the air conditioner off. They talked about Eric’s divorce mostly. Eric enjoyed

the conversation and the chance to talk to a close friend, someone who knew Emma and Erica. The men didn't talk about emotions and feelings, per se. These things were mutually understood throughout the conversation. When Eric talked about Emma moving to Manhattan, Bingo understood Eric missed her. When Eric said Erica's name, Bingo knew how much Eric loved her.