

Cheaters

Creative Nonfiction by Laura Bernstein-Machlay

At 22, my friend Clara finds herself alone and pregnant. At the same time, I'm sick—languishing-sick, collapsing-sick. Sick and swooning like a consumptive heroine. All during the early months of Clara's pregnancy, I lay around my mother's house trying to figure out what the hell is wrong with me. I'm frail as my elderly Zaidy. Walking hurts, shifting my head off the pillow hurts, lifting my hand to pet Jello Biafra, my mom's unfortunately-named cat-of-the-moment, uses me up for hours. I sleep most of the day and lay awake at night in the silky grip of fever, sweating through light-shows projecting behind my eyes, jabbering to ghosts climbing through cracks in the ceiling. I get tested for everything the doctor can think of—mono, strep, anemia, chronic fatigue, leukemia, Lyme Disease, T.B. Nothing. He sends me to specialists who tell me I'm depressed—no surprise here—that I'm aimless, out of college, back from hiking Europe, on no particular career path. An endocrinologist calls it ennui. He says it's common enough for people in my generation, and suggests I think happy thoughts.

Clara calls me on the phone. Asks how I'm feeling.

From my roost on the couch, I say, "I have the vapors. But I'm trying to keep positive about it." Clara doesn't laugh which disappoints me, even as I start panting for breath.

"Go to a different doctor," she says.

"But I've already been to four."

Eventually I drag myself to my gynecologist who, strangely, checks my liver. I'd already tested negative for all known strains of hepatitis, but when my enzyme results come back, they're so high the doctor wants to send me to the hospital. Since my

insurance is dangling by a spider web, I continue to loll on my mother's couch. I'm pretty sure I'm going to die, but at least I feel vindicated by this proof that I haven't been malingering.

And in spite of my dire predictions, over weeks and weeks, my un-lettered hepatitis slowly eases—though it leaves a permanent marker in my blood that to this day keeps me from donating.

I call Clara on the phone. “If I ever go to another party, I can tell people I cheated death.”

“It's about time. I'm bored.”

Clara mostly loves being pregnant. “Wait ‘til you see my hair,” she says. And, “My skin! I glow like a goddamn cherub.” Clara's recently started dating the father of her baby, but isn't in any rush to marry him. Like me, she's out of college, out of work, and clueless about her future—except her future includes a child. Also like me, she's living off savings and the kindness of her parents, so neither of us can afford to be extravagant. For me that's worked out well enough what with my mystery illness, but Clara likes to keep busy. In her summer-personality, she's constantly gardening, rollerblading, canoeing, hiking, while I prefer to hunker like a mantis in air-conditioned bliss. But it's winter now, and she's getting big.

So when I'm up to driving, I take myself to Clara's Detroit flat where we ignore the peeling paint, the shallow coughing of the furnace. Since I'm recovering from near liver-failure and she's pregnant, we can't go to clubs and drink Jagermeister in Clara's case, or Scotch in mine, and dance—heretofore one of the principle pastimes we have in common. Instead, we sprawl like moss across her living room carpet, drink raspberry

tea and eat Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies by the sacksful. To keep ourselves amused, we play Scrabble, cheating enormously.

“It’s all about the integrity of the board,” says Clara.

“I still don’t think *moogly* is a word.”

“No,” says Clara, “but it should be. We have *snort*. We have *nostril*. We have *booger*. Clearly, a snorted booger is moogly.”

I think about it for a moment. Take a gulp of my sweet raspberry tea, lick at the extra sugar coating the sides of the cup. Clara’s making sense. “All right. But then I can make *shunk* for a double word score.”

“Use it in a sentence,” says Clara.

“Well, shunk me sideways! Joe’s nostril just snorted moogly boogers.”

Clara nods. “We’re brilliant.”

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I learn the art of Scrabble-cheating at my Bubby and Zaidy’s kitchen table while the sky peeks in from a window over Zaidy’s shoulder. When my mother leaves me here for long summer days or on weekends during the school year, my grandparents go about their business: Zaidy digs at his meticulous garden or practices his cello, and Bubby’s a teeny whirlwind washing and hanging the clothes on the line, turning steak into burger with the ancient meat grinder she latches onto the counter and churns like butter, cleaning and cleaning and cleaning. Sometimes, Cousin Shayna visits too, and we keep each other entertained by burrowing like moles through Bubby’s collections, buttons and soap and ceramic tchotchkes and scarves for babushkas and silk handkerchiefs with monograms belonging to strangers. When Shayna’s not there, I follow after Bubby and Zaidy like a duckling as they do what they do, pick at them like a triggerfish at a coral.

“Why do you boil water just to pour it in the sink?” I ask Bubby.

“To get rid of the germs.”

“Why don’t you use Mr. Clean in the bottle?”

“Piffle. What does a man know about cleaning?”

“Why do you keep piles of newspaper on the counter?”

“For working on,” she says. “When the top layer gets dirty, throw it away and abracadabra, a fresh counter.”

“Why do you put the rocks in the hole before you put in the bulb?” I ask Zaidy.

“To help with drainage.”

“Why do you only grow vegetables in the alley?”

“Because the vegetables are jealous of the flowers and grow better where they don’t have to look at them.”

Sometimes in the afternoons, Bubby will take a break and play Rummy 500 with me, making sure to let me win which I do gleefully and with much fanfare. And in the evenings, after we finish watching Star Trek reruns—“Ooh, Mr. Sulu and his eyes,” says Bubby with a shiver—we all three play Scrabble. As with Rummy 500, Bubby usually does her best to let me win, but I can tell it aggravates Zaidy who likes his victories.

“Can I make *EEK* like a scream?” I ask.

“Such a good word,” says Bubby while Zaidy narrows his eyes and sighs.

Meanwhile, Bubby and Zaidy fill the board with Yiddish words, *oy* being a favorite, especially at the end of a game when the board is nearly closed. But they’ve also been known to use *feh*, *dreck*, *goy*, *shlep*, *bubkes* and others. On one memorable day, Zaidy makes *plotzing* on a triple word score and he’s in a good mood for the rest of my visit.

Years later, when I make these words with Clara, she's fine with it as long as I can use them in sentences, as long as they fit the integrity of the board.

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With Michael in Seattle, Scrabble expands to fully-formed, beginning to end, theme-games, complete with tiles meandering like pill bugs off the board and onto the floor as necessary to complete words. Like me, Michael loves to chew on words, loves to swallow them whole, though he's less comfortable than me at creating them like phantoms out of the ether—or breaking the rules, whatever they may be. But he loves me, loves me so much that he puts up with gibberish and Yiddish when I make a good case for it.

“What about a body-themed board?” I say, looking at my tiles at the start of another game. “Then I can use *tushy*.” And Michael just sighs a little as is his way.

Michael, who looks a cross between Kurt Cobain and Jesus, an artist with perfect, painter's fingers that taper like candles. He reminds me a little of my Zaidy who had those same artist's hands, the same long-suffering way of sighing, the same tendency to wheeze on and off throughout the day. He's a gentle man, already a failed writer at thirty. When I meet him, he's at a general low point. How else to explain why he insists on loving me—a girl who can't make herself love him in return—for a year? Who's threatened to skip town the entire time we're together.

“But why Detroit?” asks Michael. I've seen it on TV. It's awful there.”

And what can I say about the home I left behind, the city that birthed me. That it's been lied-to, cheated-on, abandoned. That like me, it's had to start over again and

again with nothing but some dirt in its pockets and a couple fistfuls of blind, stupid faith. I don't say anything. What, after all, is the point?

And though I haven't left Seattle yet, Michael has to know we're doomed to spark-out sooner or later. Nevertheless, he sometimes tries to educate me on how to be a better girlfriend. To do this, he uses examples of failed exes.

He says, "You remind me of Manda when you hold your head like that and stare into space. She tended to be distracted, too. Of course, you're prettier than her." And, "Sometimes it seemed like Arlene didn't like being touched, either. It's what broke us up." I get his messages perfectly well, but it changes nothing.

"I'd do him," says Clara with a shrug when she leaves her son with her mother and comes to visit me in Seattle, when she meets Michael over tapas and beers which make Michael—allergic to progressively more and more things associated with me—sneeze and cough until he's gasping like a fish on land. Until he needs to go outside for a little walk-around.

"He's got that burnout, woebegone look I always coveted in boys in high school," says Clara. "I bet he's decent in bed."

"Feh," I say. But I'm not being fair.

Because I'm heartsick the entire year I'm with Michael—heartsick like a wilting, Victorian rose—over Dylan who came before. Dylan who loved crosswords—there being no cheating possible on crosswords. Dylan who once lay with me on the deck of the Seattle-to-Bainbridge ferry, this during the Perseid meteor shower. How we passed between us the bottle of Oban Scotch swathed in a paper bag. How later, he wrote me a crappy poem about that night which I now sort-of wish I hadn't destroyed. How my tiny

Bubby would have gone crazy for him—the voice, the shrug—though he'd have to kneel to look her in the eye.

Tall-as-an-oak-tree Dylan—or just about—so that I could climb him, so that when I stood beside him, I maybe reached his collarbones. And when I gave him my full weight, when I lay atop him, body to body, I was for once flawless, perfect as a moon-silver against the long sky.

When Dylan leaves me for the fiancée I didn't know existed, I settle into despair like an old, slouchy jacket. It doesn't matter we were together less than a handful of months. I mourn like the world died. I abandon my writer friends and adopt a cat on death row, Mathilde, who immediately climbs into the bowels of my refrigerator to escape my desperate clutch.

It's why I allow Michael to love me, why we play Scrabble like our lives depend on it. Why, when he asks if I love him in return, I lie and say of course, of course I love you.

“You're inscrutable tonight,” says Michael. He reaches out to touch my jaw and I recoil before I can stop myself, but he doesn't react other than to bring his arm down to his side and wheeze a bit since he's allergic to Mathilde.

I smile apologetically, then exchange my Scrabble tiles for new ones—rules be damned. “Maybe we should make it a sex-themed board,” I say, looking at my letters and realizing I can now spell *debauch* for huge points.

Michael looks pleased. “I can work with that.” Then, “I'd still love to take your picture. Won't you let me?” That's Michael's thing—he makes his meager living hooked over a computer, manipulating pixels and images for a local big-wig photographer.

“But it’s worth it,” he says when I suggest he look for a new job, one where his boss won’t steal his labor and talent and claim them as his own. “I’m learning so much,” he says. And I don’t care enough to push him. But I haven’t yet let him take my picture.

“Nope,” I say. And as usual, he asks why, but I’m too cowardly to tell the truth, even to myself—that I don’t want reminders of this time, that I’m just marking days until it’s over and I figure out what to do next.

“I’m shy,” I say, “I don’t like how I look in photos.”

But he asks so little of me that I know I’ll eventually give in. And I do, when I let him take a few awkward photos of me on a hidden beach at twilight—the better to hide behind shadows.

Some weeks or maybe months later, after Michael finally wakes up and lets me go for someone who, hopefully, loves him better, I come home to my apartment one afternoon to find a blinking message waiting for me.

“It’s me,” says Michael’s voice, newly buttery-smooth, on the machine. “I finally developed the pictures. They’re beautiful, you’re an angel. But just to be sure, I manipulated them a little, narrowed your waist, cleared your skin to make it perfect. You’ll love them. I just need you to sign a photo waver. Call me.”

I never consider calling him, not for a single heartbeat. Instead I phone Clara.

“Michael’s finally got a version of me he can change,” I say.

“You’re pretty hard to change once you’ve made up your mind.”

I don’t believe her. “I haven’t lived in the same apartment for more than a year since I moved here. I change schools, cities, states, like socks. Even the blood in my veins is different than it used to be.”

“But it took a near-death experience to make that happen,” says Clara.

She’s right. She often is—it’s what makes her a good mother.

“I’m a liar and a cheat,” I say.

Clara laughs. “Of course you are. Who the hell isn’t?” I think about that for a moment, sip the raspberry tea I recently bought at a health food store down the block, its package promising to up my immunities, to ease my sore throat. It’s unsweetened and I pucker a little.

“You sound tired,” says Clara.

“I’m sick again. I hardly write anymore.”

“You know what I’m gonna say,” says Clara. “But go ahead. Ask me anyway and I’ll tell you. Maybe this time you’ll listen.”

“So what do I do?” I ask her.

“Come home,” says Clara. “Detroit misses you. You’ve been away for a long time and it’s enough. Come home.”

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So I do.

I pack up my cat and my single carful of possessions, and I go home. To potholes and traffic and crumbling buildings. To the place I started, even as it’s starting over yet again. To the true story of the rest of my life.