



(Short) Short Stories
by James Gapinski

Affectionately
Dysfunctional

Scars Publications
2007 chapbook

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Acknowledgements

“Keeping Up Appearances” was previously published in *55 Words*, April 2007.

“I Play Chess with Myself” was previously published in *The Muse*, volume 36, 2007.

Mom, Capital M

The first time I gave anybody flowers was in elementary school. I sat next to this girl named Noreen in class. Sometimes she would pass me notes. Of course the desires that she revealed in those notes were never directed at me; it seemed that every week she had a new crush. I kept telling myself that the notes were just her way of teasing me; I was sure that she liked me.

I had been to Noreen's house before. She often invited me over to watch basketball games with her. I hated basketball, but I always went anyway, just to be with Noreen.

One Saturday, when I knew I'd be going over to watch the game that night, I spent the afternoon picking flowers along the side of the highway. Within a few hours of work I had quite an impressive bouquet. I suppose most of the flowers were probably just pretty looking weeds, but I didn't know the difference back then. I tied them all together with ribbon and cut off the flower stems at an angle like I had seen Mom do a hundred times.

I made sure my hair was combed and I dug through my t-shirts to find the one that looked least worn out. I wore my good pants too, the ones that Mom only let me wear to church and nowhere else. Mom wasn't due home until late that night; she had the closing shift on Saturdays, so she would never know if I wore my good pants just that once.

I ventured off for Noreen's house when the sun was setting. The sun sank lower as I walked, and my confidence sunk with it. As I turned down Main I felt my palms grow sweaty around the bundle of flowers.

When I turned onto Oakwood, Noreen's street, the bouquet seemed to get heavier in my hand. Some petals shook loose as I tried desperately to keep from dropping the immense load. My feet kept moving, but everything else stopped on Main. I felt my stomach tighten up as I drifted further and further away from the intersection. My eyes started to sting in the wind, and they teared up as I approached the Noreen's neighbor's house.

I darted right past Noreen's house; then my innards drove me back toward Main. After moving closer to Main, I gathered some of my nerves

again and I turned around toward Noreen's. But I overshot again. And so I continued, pacing back and forth, up and down Oakwood.

I played possible scenarios out in my head over and over again: Noreen smiling, Noreen being embarrassed, Noreen laughing, Noreen crying, Noreen's mother answering the door instead, Noreen's brother, her father. What if the dog jumped on me and ruined the flowers? What would I say?

I balled up my fists, and I felt them get warmer and warmer. The flowers shed more and more pedals as I shuffled along the sidewalk.

I felt more parts of me getting yanked back to Main, where I had left myself. As each part left it tried to drag the rest of my frame with it, but I wouldn't go. I couldn't go. I had to give Noreen the flowers. How could I go through life without ever giving a girl flowers?

My warmth left me (except for the sweaty warmth rising in my hands). I paced the sidewalk shivering.

The last few sun rays disappeared over the horizon as my frozen ears began to take flight. I couldn't hear anything except for my footsteps. Then a few seconds later I could hear everything, so many annoying sounds piecing my senses. I couldn't concentrate, I couldn't think of what I was going to say to Noreen.

Then my knees went. I started to have trouble walking. I buckled back and forth and eventually found myself coming to wobbly a stop in front of Noreen's door.

I reached out my hand to press the doorbell. That's when my bladder went.

As soon as I shuffled back to Main I found most of myself again. The only things that still seemed broken were my eyes. They kept leaking salty tears as I found the rest of my strength and bolted home.

I spent hours trying to get that ammonia smell out of my pants (my good pants). I couldn't let Mom find out what I had done. I couldn't let anybody know. I scrubbed and scrubbed until finally there were no traces of urine left on the trousers. I heard Mom's car pull into the driveway just as I finished drying the pants and hanging them back in my closet. I put

away Mom's blow-dryer and snatched the flowers from off of the bathroom counter just as the front door creaked open.

"Danny," I heard Mom call out, "I brought home chicken for dinner." She always brought home chicken. She worked at a diner that sold seven different varieties of chicken: crispy chicken, barbeque chicken, honey chicken, spicy chicken, pepper chicken, and the house special (the house special tasted exactly the same as the pepper chicken, but they claimed it was a secret blend of herbs and spices).

Her keys dropped with a jingle onto the coffee table as my feet marched down the stairs. I didn't even have to think about what to say, because I sensed that it didn't really matter. Mom's eyes were already welling up. Either Mom had the intuition of a psychic or she noticed the flowers behind my back as I walked over to her. Either way, it didn't matter what I said, she was already embracing the moment.

"I picked these for you," was all I could muster up, but it was enough. She bent down and gave me a bone crushing hug and let her tears fall out in streams.

The lie tasted sour in my mouth. I hadn't exactly picked them for Mom, they were for Noreen. But I wouldn't dare tell anybody that, just like I wouldn't dare tell anybody about my good pants. Besides, it made Mom happier than I had ever seen her. I'd rather burn in Hell for not confessing my lie than tell Mom that I didn't really pick those flowers for her.

Spare Change

The earthen bench that she sits upon blends with her form. The deep, rich browns, grays, and greens of her clothing and her speckled brown hair; she is organic while the lines between soil, bench, person, and guitar converge.

She hums along. There aren't any words—none are needed. I sway to the music while a few passing people toss coins into her open guitar case. She strums a final chord and puts the instrument away. She gets up, brushes the dirt from her skirt and walks into the distance. I watch her walk away and I don't say anything (story of my life).

Next week I spot her again, and we do the same dance, only this time I decide to talk to her. “Get away from me creep,” she says, “or at least drop some change in my case before you start hitting on me.”

I turn and stick my hands into the pockets of my tweed jacket. The deep, rich browns, grays, and greens of my clothing starkly contrast against the blue sky as I mound the nearest hill and walk out of her life forever.

Tub

The mermaid in the tub has long tendrils of hair wisping back and forth—there is no Duessa here. Light swirls over the rippling surface, crystalline wonders shooting toward my retina. Then she shrieks and throws a bar of soap at me. I rush out of the bathroom and back to the hellish shag carpet of the adjacent hallway.

Keeping Up Appearances

He sits with his head sunk into her lap, sobbing uncontrollably.

She gently runs her fingers through his mottled hair. Tears streak down her face too; even though she didn't love him, she never wanted to hurt him.

He continues to cry, but only because it's what is expected of him; in actuality, he's happy.

I Never Cried in a Cemetery Before

I never cried in a cemetery before, not even when my grandma died. I got misty-eyed, but only because I knew that's what I was supposed to do. I thought about all the sad things in my life (my grandma's death included), and then I tried to squeeze it out through my eyes—but it didn't come.

Not at my grandpa's funeral either (but that was to be expected) or at my Aunt Julie's. But today I cried as I sat in that graveyard where we had one of our most magical moments together. I sat down on the ground where we almost kissed (but were too shy to go through with it). I felt the chilling breeze and I remembered how we sat that night—we were shivering, snot dripped down my nose and my ears stung, but neither of us wanted it to end, so we kept sitting together.

Then (after I remembered) I cried and I cried and I cried, like I've done so much these past weeks. I also smiled between spurts of tears; I let myself fall back on the grass and I could almost feel your arms wrap around me. Then I collected myself and went home. I was getting cold, and there wasn't any reason for me to stay in the cemetery.

I Play Chess with Myself

I play chess with myself, in the old park by the road. The knight takes a pawn; old women feed the birds. The rook takes a pawn; pigeons eat scattered seeds. A pawn takes a pawn; the day grows late. The game is progressing; the wind whistles past. The queen makes her move; a young woman walks a dog. Check, then check mate; she doesn't even look at me.

I play chess with myself.

About the Author

James Gapinski is a Wisconsin writer, the current co-editor of *Beauty/Truth: A Journal of Ekphrastic Poetry*, and the editor of the Canvas Press Collection series. Recent publications include *Down in the Dirt*, *The Muse*, *Quantum Leap*, *Splizz*, *Three Cup Morning*, *Words-Myth*, *Flutter*, *55 Words*, *Qarrtsiluni*, and *Unlocking the Mysteries*. He also co-wrote the script for *In Spades*, a short film by Avant Guardian Productions.

James works as a writing tutor for the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater; he also tutors over the Internet for the University of Wisconsin-Colleges Online Writing Lab. In 2005-2006 he conducted research on ekphrastic poetry at the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha, and he recently received a grant to continue his research at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

In 2007 James won the Angela Peckenpaugh award for writing and the J. J. Rao award for environmentalist works.

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