

## Don't Bring Me Down

*she woke and picked up her cell phone a morning ritual scavenging data nervously  
checking email for potentially bad news*

**YOU FAILED THE LAST EXAM YOUR FINAL GRADE IS NOW A FAILING ONE.**

**SEASONS GREETINGS**

**PROFESSOR**

*she gasped and laid back this was supposed to be her final semester she was supposed to  
graduate she promised everyone and failed  
her mother says*

“Laura, you forgot to take out the trash.” She says it with the intensity and despair of Morgan Freeman telling the White House press there’s a meteor hurtling towards Earth. Waking, Laura opens her eyes to the TV portraying a satellite emerging violently from Eric Cartman’s ass.

It takes a second for Laura to shake the sleep from her eyes and process the emotion and intent in her mother’s voice. Laura is stuck by sweat to the leather couch in the living room, and has a hardened glaze of drool on the side of her mouth. Laura can hear her mother opening the dishwasher and can feel her mother’s steely glare on the back of her head.

“That’s a good look, Laura.”

Laura tries to stand with some dignity, but chip crumbs fall from her chest to the floor. She looks forlornly at the ground. “Gad damnit!” screams Cartman. Her mother groans and mutters something about getting the vacuum.

“I’m really sorry, Mom. I’ll drive the bags to the dump in a minute.”

Laura feels a sharp pain in her right rib and reaches around to peel a sweaty metal rectangle from her back. She wipes her phone screen clean and checks her inbox. No weird all-caps email, of course. *same dream as the night before.*

Her mother takes the dishes in the sink and tosses them a little louder than necessary into the washer. The racket forces Laura to fully defuse herself from the couch and trample up the stairs into her room.

“Hurry up, Crumblina. I have a friend coming over soon.” As she crosses the threshold into her room, Laura hears her mother’s humming laughter at her own pun. The Cantwell women, matriarch and progeny, bristled from time to time at each others’ company- perhaps it was because they were, at the very core, so very similar. *how often does one clone end up murdering the other?* Or maybe it was because they each feared what the other represented. *please don’t let me grow up to be my mother.*

She twists her Rubik’s Cube a few times, but she has no conception of how to solve it. Her lack of knowledge on the Rubik’s formula was a point of pride, actually; to her, it was a statement of willful ignorance and the human condition. *nobody is going to know everything. i like the way it looks unsolved anyway.* As she puts on her hoodie, she contemplates how pretentious college has made her.

As she stuffs the trash into the back seat of her car, she fondly ponders one specific group of friends back at the college- a motley crew of goobers, sharing one messy apartment, deemed by Laura as the one and only “Kramer House”, for their bohemian approach to higher education. She had her original encounter with this special gaggle of nimrods on her first day at the college. Carrying newly emptied boxes of pots, silverware and the like to dispose, she spotted a group of musty flannel-wearing ragamuffins bobbing their heads up and down in the dormitory dumpster,

like some kind of bizarre grungy puppet show. Upon closer inspection, she'd find them appraising metal frames, deflated wheels, and bells rendered silent by rust.

"Free bikes!" they told her. A friendship was born.

Laura smiles at the memory, until rancid garbage juice dribbles onto her shoulder. She utters a growl of disgust, bangs her steering wheel, and turns up the radio. The Electric Light Orchestra tell her not to bring them down, *groose*. She apologizes silently and then warbles along with the song like a mandrake.

When she returns from her voyage, she sees a strange car in the driveway. Her mother sits, with a man who apparently posed for Marlboro, on rocking chairs on the porch. They're both smoking cigarettes, but the man holds his with his thumb and pointer fingers, like a cowboy.

"Howdy, ma'am. They call me Hart Wallace." says Hart Wallace.

"Howdy, sir. They call me Laura Cantwell." she replies, with the exact same inflection, and perhaps the lightest mocking twang of a Southern accent.

Her mother dubiously eyes her daughter, and takes a long suspicious drag of her cigarette.

"Mr. Wallace and I were just talking about the recent general election."

"Gave y'all a whoopin', didn't we? Even here in the Old Line State, and Baltimore is as liberal as a gay vegan communist! Only joking, you understand."

A Republican is a rare sight for Laura. She considers how many conservatives she encountered in her four years at college. The only one that stands out in her memory is the Randian Professor of Literature who staunchly believed that the heroes of The Grapes of Wrath

were the capitalist mavericks who threw their fruit into the sea despite the cloying objections of the parasitic Okies.

He had a painfully recurring joke: “The Joads had sour grapes- no pun intended.” The pun was intended. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he remained untenured at the university. Like many strongly-opinionated people, the Professor was a brightly painted target of satire; Laura and company spent many drunken nights mocking his Objectivist rants.

Laura emerges from her thoughts with a quiet sigh and appraises the man who sits, rocking, in front of her, with his thumbs in his belt loop. *he looks like he should have a shotgun and a spit bucket. gay vegan communist? gender studies gals would shit on his head for that one. he's like a cartoon character. yosemite sam, foghorn leghorn. well, at least he isn't boring. i sure hope mom isn't fucking him.* Laura felt a headache coming on.

Laura’s mother rubs balm on her lips. Something about the way she does it (*the noise? the face she makes?*) sends waves of annoyance down Laura’s spine.

“Does that ChapStick have menthol in it, Mom? That’s bad for your lips.”

“I suppose being stuck overnight to a leather couch is the new thing in skin care.”

“Wasn’t your New Years resolution to stop smoking?”

Her mother bristles, flicks her cigarette down, and stomps it into the ground with her leather sandal. “Laura, honey, you can’t flush your t-a-m-p-o-n-s down the toilet, it clogs the darn thing.”

“Mom, goddamnit, he is a *Republican*, not a fucking toddler! *He knows how to spell!*”

The Republican (Laura has already forgotten his name) makes a scratching motion and a hissing cat noise. Laura and her mother, temporarily in psychic unison, tell him to shut the fuck up.

Laura looks at her mom with a mix of emotions, and then says, “I’m gonna go in. It was a real hoot and a holler, cowboy.” She then lets out a viciously enthusiastic buckaroo whoop, *to remind him of his home on the range*, and then walks away, bow-legged, as if she were recently unsaddled from her best bronco.

She storms up the stairs, and is conscious of how adolescent the action is. Laying on her bed, she remembers that she smells of garbage. She sheds her clothes in the bathroom and finagles the shower knobs like a safecracker to get the perfect temperature. For her shower, that was “lukewarm”- any hotter and the water would be volcanic, any cooler and it would freeze her shadow.

She reminisces about her old dorm shower. Her ritual was always the same- enjoy the shower for five minutes, then invariably the light would turn off automatically (presumably to save the rainforest), she would tramp damply outside to the light switch and press it just as the sensor picked up her movement, the bulb would flicker indecisively before choosing darkness once more, repeat ad nauseum. Even this brings a nostalgic grin to her face. Back at her mother’s house, she gets soap in her eye.

“Fucking soap in my eye!” she exclaims.

When she dries herself off she checks the Politico headline on her phone, like the erudite post-collegiate adult she believes herself to be.

**“DEMOCRATS LEARN TO LOVE THE FILIBUSTER”**

She soon falls asleep.

*she checks her email while her mother rides off into the sunset*

**TO STUDENT**

*YOUR FINAL PORTFOLIO HAS LOWERED YOUR OVERALL GRADE TO A FAILURE  
FOR CONTAINING (1) INTRICATELY DETAILED DRAWING OF JON HAMM (NAKED) AND  
NOTHING PERTINENT TO THE CLASS*

*FROM TEACHER*

*laura would be returning for another semester she lays back and thinks and shrugs  
there are worse things*