

ABLATION

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About the Author

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A classmate of mine had her tonsil removed for what I could only assume were pretty serious health reasons. When I was six, on three separate occasions, my mother had to remove a pimple in my backside, bits of sand wedged in a wound on my sole, and a splinter of wood that had gotten inside my finger. In 2000, the year we left my mother's province to move to the city, we brought with us a karaoke machine, but some years later it had to be removed along with some of our other stuff, because in our rented apartment there wasn't much space to be had and keeping it meant we had to live like sorry fillings in a soggy sandwich. Until now I don't have a room of my own, and despite all my Virginia Woolf-like gushing that everyone ought to have a headquarters in which to house her thoughts and silences and solitude, still I've found myself chucking out journals here, a scrapbook there, bric-a-brac I once held dear and thought I couldn't live without.

On my desktop I keep a folder into which I just drag and drop files I've yet to sift through and decide later on what to do with, but more often than not they eventually end up in the Recycle Bin, fated to remain only as irretrievable data buried somewhere deep in my hard drive. Unless the government's tech guys come tramping into the house and combing for some file in my computer detailing how I'll blow up the Palace, all those deleted files are as lost forever as all those tangible possessions I've blithely thrown away. Until about two weeks after the official end of classes last semester, I'd thought I'd disposed of every conceivable thing I could, either with just a press of the 'Delete' key or by dumping it into a trash bin; that sometimes with nary a moment's further deliberation I'd removed a lot of clobber and some I couldn't even remember ever having, curios I'd valued with daffy, zealous care. What I didn't expect was that I'd ever have to remove a grade.

A grade of 4.00, the university rules say, can be removed by taking a removal examination. If you pass, you get a grade of 3.00; otherwise you get a grade of 5.00, that is, you fail the course. It was a comfortable enough arrangement except that the grade was given on a Friday and the test was scheduled on Monday, and by then I'd seen so many friends post their vacation photos on Facebook that, unabashedly, I thought it unfair that I still had to study for and take an exam I couldn't luck out on and would probably fail anyway. The other recourse to remove that grade, I think, was to retake the course altogether and sit through the same lessons and risk getting another 4.00, or if you were really that unlucky, fail it this time.

Around a week before that Friday, I'd learned through an email from our lab instructor that I'd failed his class. The grade of 5.00, in my mind inked in bloody red, didn't seem as forbidding and keening as I'd imagined it to be, when I finally saw it. In the face of such bad news, a fit of tears and a crack-up would've been in order, and for days I'd imagined it to be the case that I'd spend the break crying myself to sleep or hurling a chair across the room, or maybe whittling off a couple of pounds

for I'd be too tired from wallowing in self-pity to even lift a spoon to my mouth. I'd conjured a monster lurking in the shadows in the wait, ready to pounce on me once the finality of my failure came. In another dream, despair had taken the form of an old sturdy house caving in of its own accord, and I'd be inside just waiting for the roof to come crashing down on me. The tears would naturally spring out from some unknown cranny inside me, hot and inexhaustible, and I wouldn't have to force myself to feel the pain befitting such a misfortune.

No such thing happened, though, and with a dotty disbelief I watched the monster of my own creation slowly meld into the shadows; the old sturdy house still stood falling to bits within with every drop of the slates and creak of the stairs but otherwise looked deceptively stalwart from the outside, and my eyes were as dry as the Gobi Desert. Strangely, what was more depressing was that I wasn't able to live up to my own expectation of grief. That 5.00 was absolute and redoubtable indeed, but wasn't as large and amorphous as to leave me bereft of the will to go on living, which was what I'd ridiculously thought the grade would inspire in me. Still I cried only once out of the sheer need to play my part, perhaps the better to convince myself that I was sad and think myself into that dismal country of depression I had to repair to. After near misses I'd for once tossed the ball out of the ring, I thought, and shouldn't I be gouging my eyes out by now?

An early childhood memory: I was waiting with my older sister by the school gate for our father, who would be riding out on a bicycle too small for his clunky long legs. He'd fashioned it himself, added a few parts so that the three of us could belt along on it no matter how dangerous and gimcrack and awkward it looked. On that particular day, he'd come to collect us with a surprise, he said, a very *nice* surprise I'd love to trade in for my afternoon dole of twenty pesos! Those days, collecting boxes of Yu-Gi-Oh! cards was the height of cool, and my parents were solicitous enough to raise their son's rank up the cool-o-meter; hence, the twenty pesos. My father looked so happy, so strong was his conviction that I'd be bowled over by his surprise, but I was young and insensitive and never one for surprises. Let her have it, I said, gesturing to my sister, and my father with all the flourish of a magician produced from his bag a mask-like something which he placed reverently into my sister's palm. It had an impossibly large plastic nose and a moustache reminiscent of Mr. Suave that tongued out sideways with a New Year's hoot when you blew on a specialized mouthpiece, and you wore it as you would a pair of spectacles. My sister tried it on foolishly several times and was effusive with thank-you's and I-love-you-Daddy's and I wondered why.

To this day I haven't asked my sister if she'd really liked the surprise, if she'd been surprised at all upon seeing it. I'd like to know if she'd only been playing her part and how much she'd lied to herself right then to be able to act and look chipper and

spew out those lines so as not to hurt our father's feelings. I'd like to know if for a minute I'd been a monster to have been largely unimpressed by his surprise, to have felt a relief that I hadn't knuckled under an abiding sense of filial obligation to give my twenty pesos up.

Once, at my grandfather's funeral, the same thing happened, only I was expected to grieve and perhaps spend the requisite forty days wearing a black mourning coat hanging off me in big drooping folds. Instead, I felt stifled and literally smothered by relatives who kissed and sniffed me as though they'd loved me all their lives. At the wake, a whip-thin doddering woman with a dowager's hump sang a requiem that moved me to tears. Her voice carried all the sadness of this world, and before I knew it I was wiping my tears with my bare hands and making these weird asthmatic gasps, my fingers trembling as if I suddenly had Parkinson's disease. I wasn't weeping over a man whom time had practically blotted out of my memory, but for a good five minutes I was shouldering a sadness larger than the plaintive guests' and the crying ladies' and mine combined.

Seeing that 5.00, I'd have liked to feel something, anything but blankness, if only to assure myself that I was still human, sentient. The 4.00, on the other hand, offered some solace: I was on the fence and had been given the freedom to hop over onto either side. The uncertainty in this case was a welcome respite. It pissed me off and gladdened me at the same time, getting that ambiguous grade, and no fear held me back from feeling quite caught in the bewildering middle. I might either swing off to fly to Timbuktu or hang myself this instant and the world wouldn't even care. The truth is, I might not have been a large measure more relieved had I gotten a 3.00 instead, or a small measure less mortified had I gotten a 5.00. I was only half sorry to receive a 4.00, and even sorrier that I'd have to remove it, for in some way around the bend I'd come to see it as an extension of who I'd been, as I saw all the things I used to think I cared about but later thoughtlessly threw out.

What I couldn't figure out, though, was why I'd never been asked the question, "To remove or not to remove?" Instead, a lot of my friends were floored when I told them about my dilemma, and the first thing they asked me was just as flooring as well: "What's happened to you?" This, I thought, I couldn't answer any more than I could tell you right off the bat what the differential of the inverse tangent of x was or what the difference was between a truss and a frame—or maybe I could, but that's neither here nor there.

An estranged friend once told me that failing a course was just as nightmarish as going to school without your pants on in your dreams, the difference being you woke up from your dreams.

It was hardly comforting, and neither was what one stranger, a smallish frizzy-haired woman with elfish ears and a very chapped lower lip, had said to me the Friday afternoon before my official hell week: “God bless you.” I was sitting in one of the back pews at the university chapel, clasping in one hand a bottle of Red Bull which I guzzled every now and then—it seemed unlimited—and my “universal” notebook in the other. I was contemplating eating a cactus or turning into one, but I had to rule out the latter since I’d never really been chummy with my witch grandmother. Then I remembered I wanted to adopt a gorgeous myelopathic Havanese puppy and I couldn’t possibly read to him Jo Ann Beard’s “The Fourth State of Matter” if my windpipe was badly perforated by cactus spines, like a colander, and that made me cry. The woman, perhaps thinking I’d gone off the rails, approached me just as I was wondering whether I could slit my wrist with a bread knife.

Another time—it was a Saturday night—I cried because I couldn’t get off on the porn films I thought were right up my alley. From Anal to Zimbabwe, I cherry-picked online porn videos in an effort to travel to the moon or the planet Pluto, anywhere but here where getting a bonus point on a hundred-item exam was the nearest I could get to reaching nirvana. In one video, a guy wearing extremely tight jeans was fixing another guy’s car when, as if egged on by an imagined sex devil, the other guy started wrestling the shoes off the mechanic and then licked and sucked each toe like a famished dog gone wolfish. I imagined this would be the fate of humanity in a deplorable post-apocalyptic world, but instead of us doing it for carnal pleasure, we’d be gnawing away at one another’s toes and biting off one another’s fingers out of sheer starvation. Quickly, I shut down my computer and resumed drawing shear and bending moment diagrams of a uniformly loaded beam.

At the 7-11 convenience store I frequented on my way to school one Monday morning, the cashier observed in a gravelly, jesting voice that I’d been buying at least three energy drinks a day these past weeks, and shouldn’t I be cutting it down? Since we were getting friendly, I thought for a second to tell him to reduce his daily fat intake because he now looked a lot like a cross between Dumbo and King Kong, but I decided to be an angel and only snarled in response. I harrumphed out of the store but not without seeing him flinch in my peripheral vision.

My mother, too, started nagging me about my dependence on energy drinks. I could pull round a tough day running only on three hours of sleep so long as I downed, say, a Panther and a Cobra, brand names which were now, to me, as synonymous with artillery as Smith and Wesson.

Instead of a gun, I carried a bottle around like a boozier and felt I could take on a goon squad of god-awful exams. Still, my mother believed that the chemicals would dissolve my intestines, which would soon just slosh around in my belly like spaghetti Bolognese. She'd yell, You do know those drinks contain caffeine, right?! *Caffeine!* She was screaming bloody murder, and with all the equanimity of a monk, I'd say, apropos of nothing, *Caffeine!* Caffeine is an alkaloid, Mommy.

When I wasn't being squirrely around my mother, I scribbled my signature in the margins of my notebook first, then on the blank center of the page, until the whole thing was filled with at least a hundred squiggly signatures. Some of my friends preferred to doodle cute anime characters, a far cry from my nonsense, on all the once-pristine pages of their notes, and I envied them this. I didn't open my notes in one class because I hated how nondescript they looked, how inconsistent my handwriting was, and so the morning after, barely an hour into the exam, I was the second to pass my bluebook and test questionnaire to our professor. I knew I'd failed again this time but I was quick to reason with myself, with anyone who gave the slightest shit about my grades, that I hadn't used my lucky Pilot G-tec-C3, that I'd drunk the wrong energy drink, that was why. There were days I'd convince myself that I was still sixteen as if this alone could account for all my life's mess.

As the hell week wore on, with more fury each day, I was going totally bonkers and taking to a great deal more peculiar, baseless superstitions. I'd take three baths every day, one in the morning, one coming home from school, another one at midnight, imagining my brain cells were gremlins and that they'd multiply to millions as the water splashed steadily against my head. I lived for a while on a nightly diet of Hany chocolate bars and Gardenia whole-wheat bread, thinking maybe pulling a Mahatma Gandhi would earn me some brownie points from the man upstairs. I stopped slathering lotion on the soles of my feet, an idiosyncrasy I'd had since I was a child, so convinced was I that this epic sacrifice would mean I'd live through at least two classes this semester without losing my marbles. Wretched, I operated on an hour of sleep and waded dozing off through an ocean of formulas and equations well into the wee hours of the morning, my slobber smearing the ink on my helter-skelter scratch papers, the yellows bursting out from the blues and blacks like the quaint flowering of dusk.

Far too often I caught up on sleep on the train, sitting in the mundane blue plastic seat, or leaning against the door with my face scrunched up against the glass, or standing up gripping the steel pole with one hand and miserably straining to hold myself erect as the train hiss-chugged down the rusted tracks. The vapid fluorescent light washed over my face so that I looked like some zombie straight out of *The Walking Dead*, or some lowly pillhead who might knife someone on a whim, and half the time that was enough to scare other passengers away and leave a circle

an arm's stretch wide around me. Once I flaked out and must have slumped over, for the next thing I knew my head was on some stranger's shoulder that smelled faintly of peppermint, my arm was squished against his bicep, my neck cricked at an unnatural, comic angle. If I could only say sorry a thousand times and not have it tell on him, I'd have done so already. I waited for a dressing-down, for I must have dribbled on his shirt too, but he just smiled and said it was okay and got off at Ortigas station.

And in class this memory would replay many times in my head, and it would be the fabric out of which I'd fashion a story, only I was smarter and more adorable and less klutzy in this one, and a more cinematic scene would end it, probably under a drizzle or on a beach or he and I standing on opposite platforms at a dour train station, bound for separate unknown destinations. It would be a sad ending but people would love it, and it would receive global acclaim, and Twentieth Century Fox would make a heartrendingly stunning film adaptation to which Roger Ebert would give 3 out of 4 stars, and of which Richard Brody would say, "It is a rare, deceptive blend of a rapturous love story and the poignant search for oneself, populated by a colorful assortment of angsty characters of forward, indefatigable spirit"—or something equally grandiose and obscure. But the grating voice of our professor would pull me back to reality, and alas, I was still all alone, always alone.

A boy in my class caught my attention because he was so very smart and so very cute and looked so very cuddle-able, like a teddy bear. He had one of those surnames that still made sense when written backwards, and I found this oddly endearing. But he was a higher mortal and I was out of his league. When I say that he was so very smart, I mean that he aced all the exams and breezed through all the class requirements and exuded a certain aura of genius as if he were Einstein walking right in our midst. He was my happy crush and I was content with that, but for some reason he thought I was perhaps a tad smarter than your average joe, otherwise he wouldn't have talked to me about aldehydes and ketones and alcohols and rattled off organic reactions, all of which I'd only vaguely understood the night before. It was all I could do to nod confidently and, when asked, stammer something I was sure sounded utterly harebrained. Yet miraculously he listened to me anyway and all the while my heart leaped in my throat as I betrayed by the minute just how much more of a big fat idiot I was than I'd initially reckoned. Afterwards, my saliva turned to mud, my legs went wobbly till I could swoon and was almost too discombobulated to function.

Almost everyone I know has her heart wrapped around someone, there's no denying that, but it's another question entirely whether or not the feeling is reciprocated. Maybe there are only two kinds of people in this world—those who want and those who are wanted—and somehow I'm at the bottom of this food chain.

This fact loomed all the more glaringly during the hell week. I was unwanted and yet loath to be found wanting, while everyone around me seemed to cope well enough with the escalating pressure of the semester drawing to a close, in the company of someone whom they loved and who loved them back. It peeved me to see two people tug each other affectionately down the university's tree-lined avenues, the way they leaned into each other, their fingers laced together while their delirious laughter wafted gently away. I was sickened by and envious of it. I wanted contact, the feel of someone's warm breath on my face, of another body pressed against mine, of strong arms wound around me, but I knew if someone so much as touched my hand, I'd cringe or, worse, I'd slug him right under his eye, full on the nose, and kick him hard in the balls.

Others reveled in the welcoming warmth of friends and orgmates, and although I had just the right number of friends I didn't belong to any organization. The first time I'd applied to an org hadn't worked out, and more than I could admit, it had hurt like a wrench in my gut and I'd barely gotten through that sane, my heart heavy with the knowledge that I was forever inadequate and could only offer myself up to something larger than me once I finally pulled myself together. Some well-meaning classmates were assiduous in their efforts to convince me to apply to this org, that org, but I had yet to get my act together and until then I was all on my own, and perhaps that was sad, perhaps that was a little pathetic. Perhaps that was okay.

One of my closest friends in college was a girl whose IQ reached the stratosphere if mine was below sea level. Like the boy who was my happy crush, she was a higher mortal, but that didn't make me any less comfortable talking to and hanging out with her. If anything, like north pole to south pole, a cation to an anion, we were kindred spirits, though still fundamentally polar opposites. Days before the hell week, she organized a group study together with me and two other classmates, and at dusk we found ourselves at McDonald's along Katipunan, where university students pulled all-nighters and killed cupfuls of coffee and pored over readings by the kilometric ton or voluminous books and highlighted Xeroxed notes. Dutifully, we studied Quantum Mechanics and infinite sequences and series. And of the four of us, I was the least prepared, to say the least, and had to communicate the false notion that I'd studied even a little, though as the night dwindled away and soon the pink-yellow morning light touched the soulless streets outside, I knew the jig was up.

The Physics exam was scheduled at seven in the morning. I aimed for an exemption from the final exam and was determined to reach my target grade, and so tremblingly I shaded with my pen the hollow circles corresponding to what I fervently hoped were the right answers, every tick of the clock evil in its indifference. At one point my vision blurred, the world reeled and staggered, and I had to grit my eyes shut and prayed rabidly to God, the God I'd grown up loving as a child but

now couldn't seem to find and believe in anymore; the God for whom I'd built from rubble an altar of begging and worship in the space of two weeks out of need for anchorage. Right then I wanted to excuse myself and retch into the sink in the washroom the bland pancakes I'd eaten for breakfast, as I was too nauseated, too woozy from lack of sleep. And in my mind I did hightail it out of that room, into the debilitating heat outside, but actually I was velcroed still to my seat and cold beads of sweat stood out from my every pore only to be breezed dry by the room's frigid air.

With only about an hour to bone up before the next exam, I was hopeless but still hoping. The world was a wilderness of desperation, a girl here stood muttering in one breath endless strings of formulas, a boy there stabbed an accusing finger maddeningly at his topsy-turvy notes, someone somewhere was hollering out over the din something wrathful and demented, and I knew with the certainty of a prophet that I was doomed. I hadn't realized until the test questionnaire came flying at me that the mind could just turn itself off and all of a sudden turn on you. Back and forth my eyes travelled and tried to make sense of the numbers and letters, which seemed to move of their own accord in one crazy, taunting parade. My eyes acquired a life of their own, too, drooping mercilessly like the pendulous branches of a weeping willow, and for a good ten minutes I drifted off.

I couldn't have yet known that morning how laughably I'd get a score of eight out of forty-five in that exam. How, even though I'd be exempted from the Physics finals, it was this Math exam that would give me a grade of 4.00. For at that time all I could think about were the hills and valleys of slumber luring me to rip my bluebook in half and stride defiantly out into a world beyond those four walls, to bunk down right that second most especially, grades be damned.

I don't know exactly why I'm writing this any more than I can figure out why—in an essay that set out to meditate on the transience of a lot of things in my life, tangible and otherwise—I first digressed into a tangent about the difficulty of feeling, then went on talking about my hell week in what was far from a chronological order. Maybe I'm writing this so that I'll have something off-the-shelf to give to anyone who wants to know what's happened to me. Maybe I'm tired of mulling over and marshalling these thoughts, which to me are the most important but hardest and most painful to say out loud because words will trivialize them, diminish what in my head are large and so limitless as to refuse being reduced to something facile. Maybe I'm afraid these things will come out hollow and nonsensical and no bigger than mere ramblings and rantings. Maybe I'm writing this so I don't have to wrap my head around these things anymore, and maybe this is me trying to dispose of all the clutter and clobber I've unwittingly, unthinkingly accumulated all these years.

What you're thinking right now is whether I could be more unhinged than I've already painted myself to be here. And when I tell you how I've twice called in sick just so I could skip class, though for all intents and purposes I'd been perfectly healthy; how I could lie to the doctor's face the day after about the pain in the pit of my stomach and the throbbing in my temples and the dizziness and the harrowing headaches, all those awful things I'd yet to feel in the following weeks as if by some comeuppance, if only to secure a medical certificate; how at home I only stayed in bed and stared languidly at the ceiling and waited for the tears that never came—you'd wonder how anyone, even if he'd done it, could ever admit to such a thing.

Then I could tell you about what I did feel after the second time I went to the infirmary, which was mingled sadness and befuddlement. When the kindly doctor asked me whether I was happy, I so didn't know what to say, my mouth opening and closing and opening like that of a fish gasping for air, that after a long beat he spent the next hour talking about unfulfilled dreams and harsh realities and the cruel nature of life that cared not an iota about our striving. He'd never wanted to be a doctor, he said, and I wished I could say I had my own share of unrealized dreams, too, and I used to think I knew what they were but now I wasn't so sure. I only had a vague picture of what I wanted to do, which was to live atop a mountain overlooking a dark, naked sea, with a sweeping view of the sky, in a small wooden house where I'd wake up every morning inhaling the crisp morning air and lounge about reading a good book and writing, reading, writing until twilight rolled over me and stars hung so low in the sky I could almost reach up and pluck them. I could tell you about the many times I'd intentionally gotten off at the wrong station just so I could walk for more than an hour because I hated boarding the train and the feeling of moving but not moving that I simply had to walk and know for sure I was moving.

I could tell you nothing remarkable about the day I took the removal exam, except that the streets were washed out by a rain so implacable in its ferocity that everything outside seemed misted thickly over and strangely beautiful. I could recreate for you the imperceptible feel of fat goutts of rain spitting relentlessly against my skin, the sound of jeepneys inching past me and the smack of slippers and sneakers on wet asphalt, the nodding and quivering of the filigreed canopies of the flame trees and acacia trees with every whistling gust of the wind. Clapsed in my hand was what was left of the college secretary's copy of my removal slip I'd forgotten to give after the exam. And I could tell you how it felt to hold something slowly disintegrating in your hands, and then you'll know precisely why instead of flinging that soggy mess into the nearby wastebin, or tossing it onto the road like a gum wrapper, I put it into my mouth and swallowed it whole—unless you're lucky, then you won't.

