

Turtle Soup Is Enough - Sample

Margaret O'Connor

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Chapter One

The Spirit of My Household

The spirit of my household is one of chaos and nudity.
And grit, too.

Let me explain.

I called my mother yesterday. I called because my therapist told me that the best way to grieve is to talk to the people who know exactly what I'm going through. These people happen to be Joel, my father, Ruth, my mother, and Dontavious, my little brother.

It's Dustin who answers.

Dustin: "Margaret, my daughter, how are things?"

"Hi, Dustin."

"How'd you know it was me?"

"You don't sound like Mom."

"You called just in time."

"Just in time for what?"

"Mom is making Dontavious drink his own piss."

"What?"

"She's making him drink his own piss."

I hear Mom in the background shout, "*That's not true!*"

"Can I talk to Mom?"

The sound of Mom grabbing the phone out of Dustin's hand.

Mom: "Hi, Margaret."

"Hi, Mom. Don't make Dontavious drink his own piss."

"He's not going to drink his own piss. He peed in a cup."

"Okay."

"We have had *many discussions* about not peeing in the kitchen cups."

Indeed, we discussed the issue at length when I was home over Christmas break. I had laughed and laughed and laughed and Dad had snapped, "*This isn't funny, Margaret.*"

"Yes."

"So, I told him that he couldn't have his phone for a whole month because he peed in the cup."

"Seems reasonable."

"He was going to throw a fit. So, I told him that he could choose between no phone or drinking his own piss. But he's not going to—"

"Can I talk to Dontavious?"

"I'll put you on speaker."

"Dontavious, buddy, take the no phone."

Mom: "He's not going to—"

"Dontavious. Dontavious? Buddy, don't do it—"

But then there's a yell and the sound of Dontavious gagging.

Mom: "I'll be damned."

Life is full of choices.

Mom texted me later that Dontavious seemed to be especially enjoying his phone that night.

You may be wondering what events might lead Dontavious to pee in one of our kitchen cups in the first place. Perhaps you're wondering this among a myriad of other things. After all, a good Christian household like ours should hardly be full of nudity and urine in places they don't belong. I have found that people who were not raised in our specific breed of chaos often have difficulty understanding it. So, I always do my best to explain.

I will never forget the day when Dustin came running inside to accost me while I was reading in my chair. A common occurrence.

"Margaret! Margaret! Margaret! Margaret! *Margaret! Magareeeeeet!!!*"

I dog-eared a page in my book, taking my time to set it on the table beside me. My chair at home is giant and red, hidden in the corner of our living room. My mom keeps the cupboards stocked with lemongrass tea, so that's what I'm always drinking. I sipped my tea while Dustin shook the arms of my chair in anticipation.

"MARGARET."

"Yes, dear?"

"There's this spot in the front yard where I always pee and—"

"What?"

"There's this spot in the front yard where I pee—"

"In the front yard?"

"Yes, Margaret, keep up!"

"*Where you pee?*"

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Yes, Margaret, a spot in the front yard where I pee."

We live directly adjacent to Highway 24. Peeing in our front yard is public urination.

"Why don't you just come inside and pee?"

"*Because, Margaret, I don't like washing my hands. Anyways—*"

"Why don't you just pee inside and *not* wash your hands?" I was laughing.

"*Because* it doesn't work that way. Just shut up and listen to my story! There's a spot in the front yard where I always pee—"

"Your pee spot."

Dustin raised his hands in aggravation. "YES, MARGARET, MY PEE SPOT—"

"In the front yard."

"*Oh my gosh, will you shut up and listen?* There's this spot in the front yard where I always pee. And guess what?"

"What?"

"It smells really, *really* bad. And all the grass there is dead."

And I roared with laughter. I laughed so hard that tears rolled down my face.

Another time, when I was home visiting from college, Dustin informed me he had been suspended for public urination at his high school. He had to write a paper about the seriousness of the issue. I helped him compose some tasteful poetry to add to the end of his essay.

"Don't be a fool

Pee in the urinal."

This poetry, however, did not aid him in his mission. The next visit home, he told me he had peed off our deck on the second floor.

"And guess what?"

"What?"

"The higher up you pee, the longer your stream is! The only reason it seems so short when you go in the toilet is because you're so close to it!" He was giggling, giggling, giggling as Mom stared at the ceiling like she often does at the dinner table when she's forced to ponder the kind of children she's raised.

“Science is amazing! Isn’t it, Maggie?”

“Sure is, Dustin.”

These are the reasons that I had laughed so hard over break when Dustin filled his plastic canister to the top while emptying his catheter, and so then subbed one of our coffee mugs to finish the job. Dad had raged at me to not encourage this kind of behavior, but something inside of me was deeply grieved by Dustin’s lack of ability to kill our grass with his shenanigans. And when I laughed, Dustin smirked silently in my direction.

I think these are the events which may have led Dontavious to pee in one of our kitchen cups. Dontavious is always trying to mimic Dustin’s humor. He’s always trying to fill the void of our grief with his own shenanigans. Dontavious, however, doesn’t need to mimic Dustin’s humor at all. Dontavious is just as funny in his own way. Like when he told our older sister, Isabelle, he was going to marry a black woman, have three black children, and then adopt one white baby just so someone on this planet could finally understand how he feels most of the time. Or, when he threw me across the living room while practicing a wrestling move, and then towered over me in absolute panic as I lay, staring at the ceiling. “Margaret! I’m so sorry! I didn’t think you’d throw like that—you look *way* heavier!” Or consider when we flew to California for one of his championship football games. We got off the plane, and in the busyness and chaos of the airport, of professionally dressed people speed walking around us, he pulled at my sleeve and whispered:

“Margaret.”

“Yes?”

“I have a gum on my stomach.”

“What?”

“I have a gum on my stomach.”

"What? How'd you get gum on your stomach?"

He paused.

"A baby put it there."

"A baby put it there? Where's the gum from your mouth?"

He paused again. And then looked at his feet.

"I lied. There was no baby."

"How'd your gum get on your stomach?"

"I wanted to put it behind my ear so I could eat my snack. But I didn't want the snack lady to see the gum behind my ear and think I was some kind of weirdo. So, I put it on my stomach instead."

I was laughing.

"And now, it won't come off! And it hurts; it's pulling my hairs!"

"Can I see?"

"No, *Margaret*, we—are—in—public. What is wrong with you, woman? Sheesh."

Chaos and nudity. I say nudity because I think members of normal society would be shocked by how much nudity occurs in my household. Dustin and Dontavious both sleep in the nude for some reason. I found this out on break, when I roamed downstairs one morning, the taste of coffee still lingering on my breath, and attempted to wake Dontavious up by yanking his covers off.

When I say nudity, I think of Sexy Friday. Sexy Friday refers to the entire football team coming over to our house every single Friday evening. The boys, led by none other than Dustin in an American Flag speedo, always stampeded through the living room on their way to the hot tub, sporting pizza and chips and Subway sandwiches, chanting a devastating, manly roar: "*Sex-y Fri-day! Sex-y Fri-day!*" as I silently observed, sitting peaceably in my chair by the fire with my lemongrass tea and a good book.

The Sexy Friday bunch spent a total of six Sexy Fridays at Craig Rehab hospital, for which we are all grateful.

I also think of Dontavious's nipples. I think of this because one day, while I was innocently eating pizza at our dining room table, Dontavious informed us that he was lactating. Dustin informed him that until he saw it with his very own eyes, he wouldn't believe it. I, who did not want to witness such events with *my* very own eyes, attempted to leave the dining room table, only to be stopped by Dustin, who—with greasy pizza hands—pinned both my arms behind my back and shouted, “Look, Margaret! Look! There's stuff coming out of them! Open your eyes, woman!”

And as I fought to get away, Dustin, who was howling with laughter, shouted, “Get her, Dontavious!” And Dontavious advanced, nipple extended, bubbling with God knows what as I screamed and laughed and fought to run for my life.

Nudity and chaos. These are the principles on which I was raised.

Perhaps these stories don't hit the prompt like they're supposed to. Perhaps, they're irreverent and sacrilegious instead of sacred. But, in my family, chaos is something like sacred. We've always found God in disorganization, in fun, in not caring what the rest of the world thinks. I've found that God has always been present in brokenness and mess. There's something there nobody else knows about. A special comradery no one but us has. A secret. A silent current that runs through all of us like a shock of electricity. A knowledge that we're deeply loved no matter who we turn out to be or what outrageous things we do. A wisdom in knowing you can't care too much about grades or appearances or order or anything like it. You care about being who God created you to be, and that's it. Other people might not understand, but they don't have to. The O'Connor's chaos is sacred to them.



Joel O'Connor, doctor, father, and genius by accident, embodies the chaos as well as any of us. In college, he was a straight-A student until he met a pretty blonde named Ruth and flunked an entire semester's worth of courses. The man is obsessed with making yogurt in his Instant Pot. Back when we had goats, he'd make goatgurt—a variation of yogurt made from goat's milk and consumed exclusively by Joel—who apparently can stand the taste of liquefied feta cheese. One time Joel left a gallon of the stuff in his car for an entire week, and when we screwed off the lid it fizzled at first and then exploded like a bomb. Dontavious and I were stuck scrubbing it off the walls and refrigerator and floor. It had turned a sour pink color and smelled like wine and textured like curdled milk.

When I think of chaos, I think of Christmas 2018. Aunt Elyah Simpson is a devout conservative and Catholic. She is the kind of woman whose house is always clean, whose makeup is always perfection, whose order is always present. Mom sometimes laments the fact that Elyah's house is so much cleaner than ours, in which case I inform her that Elyah doesn't have a job, and all of her children are normal. Dustin and Dontavious followed them out that cold Christmas night, and as our driveway glittered with ice crystals in the beam of Elyah's headlights, in sync, the boys dropped trou and bent over. When Dustin came in, his cheeks were pink, and a smile was broad across his face. "*This* was the best Christmas ever."

Dustin was paralyzed maybe six hours after this declaration.

That's something I've always loved about Dustin. He was just the happiest kid alive. I think maybe my childhood ended when I was twelve—when my family adopted Dontavious and our household fell apart, and I grew into a quasi-parent, just trying to keep things

together. So, I've always lived childhood wonder vicariously through Dustin. I remember driving him to school one day, the light of the sun beaming in through the window, and him pressing his face against the glass and whispering, "Don't you wish you were a goose so you could fly like that, Margaret?" And I marveled at this little kid. The happiest kid alive.

He told me once, as he rolled around the pasture, me clutching a mug of steaming tea for warmth and him slightly out of breath from the work of plowing a wheelchair through a dirt path, that he fought for joy now. He used to be able to just wake up, walk into the morning air, smell the dew on the grass, and *be* happy. But it took more now. I blew on my drink and fogged my glasses, thinking that this was one of the defining differences between the two of us. Happiness has *always* been a battle for me. That's how it is, for both me and Dontavious. But even though both me and Dontavious are sadder than the rest of the family, we're also much closer to the Lord, I think.

You need some grit to survive the nudity and chaos. Nobody ever sat me down and told me that life is tough, so you gotta be tougher—but it's been modeled in my entire upbringing. Primarily by my mother, Ruth. The woman works a full-time job and raises four kids, none of whom have really turned out to be normal people. One time, a seventy-five-year-old colleague snapped her receptionist's bra strap, and Mom reduced the man to tears right in her office. I like to think that I've lived a fairly eventful twenty-one years of life. I've met a lot of people and I've been a lot of places. But I've met no one who is as badass as my fifty-seven-year-old mother, and I don't believe I ever will.

"You don't let people walk over your employees," she told me. "It's not the O'Connor Way."

Dad once invented a shocking machine out of an old phone battery. You would hold one wire, and a friend would hold the other one, and then you'd hold each other's hands to complete the circuit. Someone else would crank the cranker, and electricity would hit you so hard your arms would be shocked stiff. We'd play games where we'd all hold hands in a big circle, and someone would crank faster and faster as electricity bolted through the lot of us, until the weakest of the herd would scream and let go. Our circle would get smaller and smaller, the electric current becoming stronger with each loser, until only two people remained. Back when I was nine, I was the champion of the shocking machine. We played at the old O'Connor cabin in Nebraska, back when the lake had water and the mud was thick. I beat all my uncles and cousins and brothers until it was just me and Dad, teeth grit against screaming, clutching each other's hands for dear life as electricity bolted through the two of us.

The O'Connor Way. Chaos and nudity and grit. Keeping your problems your own problems. Sucking it up, rubbing some dirt in it. Doing what you need to do to survive.

Last Christmas, Dustin wrote Mom a letter that almost reduced her to tears. I say almost to tears because Mom doesn't cry in front of her children. Dustin wrote that his heart didn't want to forgive Luke, his best friend, for crashing the car, but he was going to forgive him anyways. Because it's the O'Connor Way to never give up on people.

Sometimes, though, the O'Connor Way isn't *my* way.

I was the first person in my family to get into counseling, my freshman year of college. My therapist thought I should get more sleep. I told her I think I should too, but I'm not sure how. I could drink less coffee, I guess, but I've been drinking coffee since I was twelve. "Strange," she said. "Why was that?" Because as a twelve-year-old, I had figured I was an adult, and adults drink coffee. This comment led

to a rather depressing discussion: Dad just wasn't home that much, what do you mean, who was parenting me? I guess it was unreasonable for me to spend more time helping Dontavious with his homework than working on mine, but Mom worked a full-time job. *Maybe* someone should have been making sure I had lunch every day at school, maybe I shouldn't have been raising the boys like I had, but my parents were just busy people. Dad once told me that being a doctor is like having golden handcuffs; they're pretty and expensive, but you can't just spend your whole life becoming a doctor and then stop being a doctor to become a parent.

The session ended with her saying, "I'm sorry your childhood ended when you were twelve." And me sitting there silent, knowing in my heart of hearts that she was probably right—I knew it was when I was twelve that I just became sad and never became *unsad*. I'm sometimes hit with waves of anxiety about Dustin and Dontavious—hit with the thought that I shouldn't be here—that maybe I should drop out of college *again* for the *third time* and move back home. I buried my hands in my pockets so no one would notice them shaking, got back to my dorm, and wept into my knees. Because I've left them all at home to fend for themselves. My mom told me last week that Dustin had been crying out, shouting my name in the middle of the night—high off his ass on medicinal ketamine—and when I didn't answer he fell out of bed trying to find me.

Chaos comes at a price, I suppose.

I remember my first cup of black coffee. It was early in the morning and freezing. I was shivering in the silence of my house, waiting for my swim coach, Madeline, to pick me up for a meet. The horizon was pink with morning sunlight. I was mad that she had signed me up for the meet in the first place. Our team was on the brink of destruction.

The coach prior to this one had been a child rapist. My life was on the brink of destruction if I'm being totally honest.

Swimming was everything to me. And when our team fell apart, so did I. So, here I was. An adult with adult problems and my adult cup of black coffee. It was hazelnut. And when Madeline's car pulled up, I dragged my swim bag towards the door and headed across the lawn, teeth chattering in the morning fog, thighs and armpits chaffing from wearing my swimsuit underneath my clothes. I opened the passenger side in my sleep deprived state, only to find Madeline's boyfriend, Tony, sitting there. He laughed and informed me that I'd be welcome to sit on his lap if I wanted, and I silently went for the back seat.

Tony's job had to do with arresting rapists and other criminals. Madeline would tell me stories about girls who would call Tony, sobbing and whispering, "*He was my friend ... he was my friend.*" She'd tower over me, looking firmly down her crooked nose as I sat in my wet swimsuit, reading between races, and say, "You can't trust men, Margaret. Not even your friends." I'd nod in serious agreement. Even the men who arrest bad men would be delighted if you sat on their lap in ignorance.

I was one of the fastest swimmers on the entire team at twelve years old, so I always swam with the sixteen-year-olds. As such, being the youngest, life was full of jokes and stories and experiences I didn't understand. I think perhaps I held such a deep distrust of men because the issues on my team were so pervasive. My dad was a good man, but he worked out of state; he was never home. And although many of the swimmers on my team very well may eventually have grown up to be kind and respectful men, because Coach Rick never respected the women on the team, none of the boys did either.

My mom thinks that women are sacred. She told me once that God created the earth and stars and animals and light out of nothing. Out

of dust he created man. And out of flesh he created woman, the crown of creation. I like this view. But Mom thinks that since men are the lower half of the species, they can't really help but act the way they act.

I used to think this too, growing up on the Tritons Swim Team. That's just the way things are—you just have to deal with it. Grit. Survive. Keep your personal problems personal. The worst of it was with our old family friend, Jason, I think. There's a lot of shame associated with getting the wrong kind of attention from someone you consider a brother. He was on the swim team with me. It was never a big thing, but an accumulation of small things. Moments of panic when he'd come up behind me and push his whole body against mine. Moments of shame when he'd threaten to fuck me. Just moments. Just jokes I didn't understand. Just shame. Pulling me onto his lap at Christmas. My cheeks burning red. Panic and shame. Panic and shame. Always at the Tritons' pool, thick with the stench of chlorine and sunblock. Like when my coach told me to jump up and down in front of him in my swimsuit before a race. I just didn't get it. Why were all the other girls refusing to jump—their arms folded across their chests in defiance? I just didn't understand, so I jumped in front of him twenty times in my swimsuit for a warmup before a race. I was just an idiot twelve-year-old—I didn't get it. Until I saw his face afterward. And then I got it.

It was during this time that I decided monsters wear skin and leers.

I have spent a lifetime unlearning these things. But it means talking. It means grit. It means knowing what's right and fighting to see it. And so, to this very day, I choose to do battle. I choose to fight to see men as people created in the image of God and not anything less than that.



It was Thanksgiving one year, and Isabelle, my sister, announced in front of my entire extended family that I had illegally purchased a strapless dress for homecoming. I glared daggers at her, vindictively chewing my turkey while Richard Simpson—devout Catholic and conservative—roared in opposition.

“Ruth?” he said as though to verify such outrageous claims. “She’s going in a strapless dress?”

“She bought it with one of her friends from school. She didn’t get my permission.”

I stared at my plate, pushing cranberry sauce around my mashed potatoes. “It’s not like my shoulders are going to be too tempting.”

“Your *shoulders* aren’t what the boys are going to be looking at,” Richard snapped.

The room was reduced to the sound of chewing and the clanging of silverware. And I realized that it was a dangerous thing to be beautiful.



I spend a good deal of energy fighting to see reality for what it really is. I think that’s why truth matters so much to me, because my world has been full of lies since the very beginning. So, I live as authentically as I can. Even when it means thinking over and over, *you’re not the kind of person who walks with their head down any longer*, while trudging through dirty slush to class. Or slapping a smile on my face and responding, “*Terrible. Thanks for asking!*” when people ask me how my day is going. I’ve been told I have a gift for honesty, but I know that honesty is just a choice, and a choice well worth making.

This is one of the defining differences between my way and the O’Connor Way. The O’Connor Way is to bury your problems, deep inside your heart so no one can see them. But there are consequences for living this way. A fire inside all of us, an unexplainable rage.

Burning our souls to charcoal. I see it sometimes in my parents and in Dustin. Sometimes, at his best moments, I see it in Dontavious too, but Dontavious keeps it too far deep for anyone else to know. Being angry involves vulnerability, and Dontavious has so adopted the O'Connor Way he just can't. Not yet. He's buried it too deep.

Dontavious is the only member of my family who I haven't seen cry since the car accident.

I see this anger in myself and have sought to eradicate it. With prayer and with biking, mostly. I bike, even in the bitter Iowa winter, where the wind knocks you to the side of the road and you're left sliding over filthy ice, filling your lungs with exhaust from passing cars. People laugh at me about it, I think. But one of the cures for depression is sunshine and exercise. There are days when the choice is between death by depression or death by exposure, and it's just not the O'Connor Way to go down without a fight. I still feel the fire, despite my efforts. The anger will come out at people who don't deserve it. I know my family does it too, because, although we as a family named our mean, hideous llama Dylan after my ex-boyfriend, Dylan the human isn't a mean or hideous person.

I think about this sometimes, because the fire inside of me is still mad at Dylan. I didn't know I was mad at him until I saw him at a Chick-fil-A over Christmas break when I was driving my Bug through the drive-through. He didn't even see me—his back was turned to the window—but I was suddenly so overcome with white-hot rage that I gripped my steering wheel and took deep breaths, the stars outside blurring as the salt of tears hit the back of my mouth. I don't think I'm mad at him for breaking up with me, but I might be mad that his dad was home every single day of his life. That his brother is well and uninjured. That he was friends with Jason growing up, just like I was, but Dylan never walked away from an interaction with Jason

feeling like maybe he was less of a person. That sometimes, I feel like a frog whose guts have been sucked out by a water bug, like maybe I'm just a bag of skin and horror and pain, and Dylan showed up with his painless upbringing and had the audacity to cause me even more grief. Maybe I'm mad because it took something big out of me—it took a lot of pain and grit to withstand the panic—shame—terror involved with letting him desire me, and then in the end, he decided he didn't desire me at all.

It's the same kind of madness that settles into the bottom of my soul when people complain. I remember Dylan venting about a violin case he was trying to return one day, venting, venting, venting, and something inside of me wanted to snap. To hit him, pull his hair right out of his head. There's something evil inside of me that wanted him to hurt like I hurt. To carry a fraction of the pain that I carried, just so he could understand. Because sometimes, Dustin's nerve pain is so bad he keels over in his chair and screams and cries like a person in labor, and there's nothing I can do but stand there and watch.

I know this anger is madness. The game of comparison is one for fools. My colleagues in Haiti are survivors of the 2010 earthquake. Some of them witnessed children buried under concrete, alive and screaming, with their parents on the surface, unable to dig them out. There was nothing the parents could do but stand there and listen to their kids die.

My Bible teacher used to say that if God was fair, we'd all be soup.

My colleague from Haiti, Isaiah, told me that he had never witnessed so many people coming to Christ in a single event like the 2010 earthquake.

I think this paper doesn't really hit the prompt very well. It doesn't hit the prompt because I don't know if I believe that *places* are sacred. Maybe just moments. Experiences of God or death or overwhelming

joy. I was so grieved this last summer that I listened to the same twenty songs on my iPod over and over again when I rode my bike. This happened because music didn't sound like music to me anymore—it was all just jumbled noises haphazardly thrown together. But I listened to the same twenty songs because I remembered that I used to really, really like those songs. And then one day, in the heat and humidity of Memphis, Tennessee, it began to downpour. There was so much rain the streets were flooding. People were running for shelter. But I threw on a bright blue rain jacket and rode my bike forever in the storm, because I had never once in my life experienced warm summer rain. I want you to apprehend the whole situation in this paragraph, but I don't know if I can help you. It smelled like dirty rain. My hair was soaked. My shorts were clinging to my legs. I shot through muddy streams on my bicycle. And the sun set the entire sky on fire, so you could see the shimmering drops from miles upwards, and a dam that was blocking all the joy in my soul suddenly burst. Suddenly, I knew that even though things were bad and they were going to take a long time to get better—suddenly I knew that God loved me enough to send his Son to die and rain to bike in. And I listened to every song on my iPod except the twenty I remembered liking.

I know that God caters every soul to the perfect amount of suffering. I know that without real problems, I would have never really come to Christ. And if right now you were to ask me if the burden I have found in existence is worth the joy I have found in the Lord, even though in the midst of the fire, I might say no, I know that the true answer is yes. And it's the truth that counts.

And so, I almost never lie. Not even about how my day is going.

In this way, my nudity has never been physical.

My grit never guise.

And my chaos is something I treasure deep within my soul. A secret.
A silent salute to The O'Connor Way.

Chapter Two

On Animals and Living with Nut Jobs

There are a lot of ways to skin a cat, but just one to butcher a turtle.

It's 2004, maybe, and me and my sister are at the Father's Day Campout, held in the old O'Connor cabin by the river. A place of mud, mosquitoes, ATVs, dirt under your nails, and sunburns in the part of your hair. Moms weren't allowed and brushing your teeth was optional. My father comes from a family of eight—Catholics, am I right?—and he and his brothers had recently captured four massive snappers. These turtles were huge and dangerous, probably averaging fifty pounds, with a bite that would take off your finger. My cousins and I crowded around the turtles' horse bucket, bare feet sinking into foul smelling mud, and named them Rex, Tiny, Snapper, and Bob.

There was a lot of talk about what to do with the turtles. They had been in somebody's yard, and that somebody had called the O'Con-

nor Boys to get rid of them. Now, here the O'Connor Boys were, all dressed up and nowhere to go.

"You ever eat a turtle?" Uncle John said to no one in particular. All the men in my family are bald and wear square glasses. *No*, was the general response of the assembly, *no one's eaten turtle—not yet*. "I gotta friend who used to cook snapping turtle soup. I'll give him a call."

One phone call later, and there we were, skin aching from sun burn and chafes from our swimsuits, jumping on the cool grass under our feet, chanting and pumping our fists in the shade of a large tree: "*Kill Rex! Kill Rex! Kill Rex!*" Uncle John put an open wrench in front of Remy's mouth. Rex, poor soul, bit down on the bottom part of the wrench in self-defense. John clamped the wrench shut, pulled the head out of the shell, and *whap*—nothing but a flash of a butcher's knife and blood and water.

The heads would snap hours after decapitation. Me and my cousins spent a lot of time sticking twigs into the turtles' mouths to trigger the reflex, giggling and screaming as the lifeless heads bit down with dangerous force.

The problem with getting at turtle meat is the shell, so I've been told. What happens next is sort of barbaric. You take all that loose skin at the neck, bunch it up around a garden hose, turn the hose on full blast, and wait as the turtle's body builds with pressure. And then *boom*, its guts explode out of its rear end among shouts and whoops from onlooking relatives. My six-year-old self basked in the gore of it and the cool evening air, running around in the mud and grass, scavenging for parts.

"Look! Look what I found!" It was my cousin, Anna, her hair pressed to her face with sweat and mud. In her hand she held a small, gray something. "Here, Maggie, put out your hand."

And there I was, six years old, with the slimy, cold, heart of a snapper, still beating in my little palm.

I can tell you, dear reader, snapping turtle is hardly a delicacy. Their meat is stringy and tastes like pond.

I often wonder if my childhood was perhaps a bit atypical.

Dustin never wears a shirt, and when he could walk, he'd walk with a spring in his step. One morning, as I sat in my chair, sipping coffee and reading a good book, he announced, "I am the chicken master!"

"The mother hen, if you will." I said, without looking up. Isabelle burst out laughing.

"Not the Mother *Hen*, Margaret. I'm not a girl. I'm Dustin—the Mother *Rooster*."

He turned with a flurry, threw open the door to the deck, looked down at the chicken pen, and with drama and heart shouted, "You rapist roosters, stay away from my hens!" And I snorted into my coffee and thought that one day, I would write an entire book full of quotes from this kid who I lived with.

Dustin used to think *going to town* was exclusively sexual. Apparently, at one point in his upbringing, while he and Dad were watching the rooster with one of the hens, Dad had said, "Wow! He's really going to town." Later that week, I commented on how Dontavious had really gone to town on those mashed potatoes, in which case Dustin spluttered a mouth full of milk and sweet apples, exclaiming, "He most certainly has *not*." An easy mistake. I used to think that rack was exclusively sexual, and when Dustin said to Dontavious, "Did you see the rack on that thing?" while coming in from the backyard, I turned around and punched him in the stomach, only to learn he was discussing an antelope he saw in the property next to ours.

Dustin shoots cats. He does. I'm sorry. He shoots them because they're rampant and foul in Peyton, Colorado. You keep this sort of

thing a secret from city people because they think you're a psychopath when they find out you live with someone who shoots cats. In Haiti, you *eat* cat on New Year's Day. Dustin told me once, as I sat in one of our spare wheelchairs, that he and Luke were skinning cats and—

"I hear there's more than one way to do that," I said.

Dustin rolled his eyes. "*Hah, hah.*"

Post-car-accident Dustin doesn't talk to me much, but he always talks a little bit more when I'm sitting in a spare wheelchair. It makes good sense if you think about it.

"Anyways, we were skinning cats and, when Luke was skinning this big black one, we heard a little *dink*."

"A little dink?"

"A little *dink*. Cause something had fallen on the ground in the garage."

We stared at each other in silence.

"A chip," I said, "to track its location."

He nodded. "Don't tell Mom."

"I won't."

I have sort of an odd relationship with animals, I think. I'm not somebody who cries when a pet passes away. I feel sad, but mostly because my family gets all sad about it and then I experience something like secondhand grief. I've always been sadder about people who die, or are starving, or being abused. It might say something bad about me, that I'm mostly concerned for my own species, but I don't know what to tell you. Animals die and my students in Haiti come into class with strips of flesh missing from their arms. One grieves me more than the other.

Ruth O'Connor—dentist, badass, and legend—once purchased a dozen peacock eggs off Craigslist and incubated them in our living room. She called me when they were hatching, and I drove home early

from a baseball game to watch. She loved those peacocks as much as any of her children. She'd cup them in her hands every night, stroke their backs, and sing them to sleep. When they were big enough to walk, she'd set them loose in the house, and they'd follow her around in a line as she cleaned and did the laundry. When they got too big to be in the house, we let them roam our property. Peacocks are loud. They honk and scream. Pre-puberty Dustin made a mean peahen impression, and he used to make sport of the peacocks who would flank out their feathers and shake their asses in his direction if he honked at just the right pitch. When I got to college, one of the girls on my wing told me her grandparents lived in Peyton, Colorado. I found out that we were practically neighbors.

I told her, "We're the people with the peacocks off of Garrett and Highway 24." And she rolled her eyes and said, "Oh, you guys are *those* people." We have a peacock colony now, with no indoor incubation, because they mate and take care of their own chicks. One by one, we lost the peacocks Mom had hatched to coyotes. Finally, there was only one that remained. George. When I was visiting home from college, Mom took me to her room, pointed to the perch where George slept and said, "He remembers when I used to sing him to sleep. He always sleeps right outside my window because he misses me."

When George finally disappeared, Mom was despondent. I told her that we could probably take some of the eggs on our property and incubate them again if she wanted, but Mom, almost crying, said, "I can't go through that kind of emotional turmoil again." I dropped the subject out of respect for Mom and her pea children.

I live with nut jobs. That's the moral of the story.

Speaking of nuts, Dustin once collected an entire year's worth of animal testicles and kept them in a gallon sized plastic bag in our

freezer. He announced that he was starting a collection and proceeded to go on a castration spree of biblical proportions—every rabbit, goat, deer, rooster—bereft of manhood, post death.

“What are you going to do with all those balls?” I asked him one day as he sat by my chair, telling me how small and in what location turkey testicles are.

“I’m saving them for my birthday party.”

“What are you going to do with them at your birthday party?”

“Oh, I think you *know* what I’m going to do with them at my birthday party.”

Unfortunately, I did. And when his birthday rolled around and he waltzed over to my chair in the living room with a plate of fried something, I politely declined, took note of the frying pan he was using, and went back to my book.

I have one more story about animals I wish to share, but I must warn you, it is the most heinous story in all of existence. My father has been a medical ER doctor for over twenty years, and he claims this story as his worst case. Worse than the woman whose legs were cut clean off at the thigh by an oncoming train. Worse than the man who shoved an eggplant so far up his rectum they had to cut his stomach open and push it back downwards. (And, I have to tell you, the eggplant story was not simply a story, but a traumatic event. Dad—the psychopath—made a casserole for dinner, revealed the gory details involved with shoving an eggplant back down a person’s rectum, and then cheerily informed us that, it wasn’t all bad news, for he was able to salvage the eggplant and use it for the very casserole that we were eating.) This story, which I am about to tell you, is the weight of five oceans worse than living with a permanent disliking for eggplant. I beg you, if you’re eating or drinking anything at this moment, put it aside

for the following paragraphs. This story is worse than murder. It is, in my personal albeit correct opinion, the epitome of human suffering.

It has to do with maggots.

I was sitting on the kitchen countertop, basking in the warmth from the open window and the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Dad had just returned from work. He's always haggard when he comes home from work because he works night shifts and then drives five hours back to Colorado. He shows up in his scrubs, reeking of BO, drinks a pot or two of coffee, goes to bed for two days, and then staggers out of his room, ready as good as anyone can be for the task of part-time fatherhood. I had caught him before he went to bed, while he was still brewing his second pot of coffee.

"So... any gory stories?" This is the question I ask him when he returns from work—it's been like that since I was a small child. Dad looked up mournfully from his task of pouring water into the coffee brewer.

"There is one," he said. "I think it's my worst case."

"Really? Did somebody die?" Another common question when hearing about his work.

He shook his head *no* solemnly. "It was bad, Margaret. This is one that you can't tell your mom."

I leaned forward in anticipation. My dad is the sort of person whose head glints in the morning light for lack of hair, but who possesses an alarming amount of hair everywhere else on his body. Dontavious once told me that he was afraid of hot tubbing with my father for fear my dad's chest and back and arm hair might migrate off of Dad's body and stick to Dontavious's instead. As a rational adult, I haven't hot tubbed with Dad since.

Anyway, Joel looked weak. He took a moment to listen to the sounds of the birds chirping outside of the window and rub his eyes under his glasses before he started his story.

"So, this woman comes in. She's overweight and in a wheelchair because of a herniated disc."

I nod. Only some of these terms have meaning for me, but I know that when Dad gets to the gory parts, he'll put them in layman's terms. Words like: guacamole, lumpy, pus, shaved, and *in* there.

"She smelled terrible," he said, walking to the fridge for a tub of yogurt. "Her son had been leaving her at home by herself when he went to work, which is abuse by neglect. So, it was obvious that she had soiled herself and she had this big nasty ulcer on the bottom of her foot. I thought that was where the bad smell was coming from. I cleaned the ulcer, and then we were going to undress her so we could clean her up before we checked on the herniated disc. She kept telling me that her skin was burning." He rubbed his hand over his lower abdomen, "Burning in this area. So, anyway, she's wearing these really tight spandex shorts, which a lot of fat people do to keep their rolls under control, so I have to cut them off." "Okay."

"And I'm cutting them off—"

"All right."

"And there are thousands, and *thousands* ..." He paused for dramatic affect as I sipped his coffee in the wait. "Of *maggots*. Everywhere."

"Maggots!?"

"Under her rolls."

I laughed in horror. I think I often laugh to cope with horrible things. I was excused from the ICU when they pulled Dustin's breathing tube out of his lungs, as my family stood in tense silence and he gasped for air, his eyes bulging, and I was shoved out of the room

because I had laughed so hard I couldn't breathe. I laughed so hard that tears rolled down my cheeks, and as they pushed me out of the hospital room I sobbed and laughed, "*D...Did you see his face?*"

I got my horrified laughter under control and said desperately, "How'd her spandex get full of maggots? Was there a dead animal in there?"

He took a bite of gurt, straight from the tub. "We think maybe she was trying to take them off to go to the bathroom and a fly just—got caught in there? And, Margaret, I mean *thousands*—and—" Over another bite, "I'm not even finished."

"You're not finished?" I whispered.

"It gets worse."

"Worse?"

Dad shook his head. He set his yogurt down and clutched the counter for strength, bowing his head and closing his eyes, "When maggots are exposed to light—they—they run towards the dark."

"No."

"Hundreds of them."

"Nope."

"In her bladder."

"No!"

"In her anus."

"Nooooo."

"In her vagina."

"No! Dad! No. What did you do?"

"I had an out-of-body experience, actually. I don't quite remember. One of the nurses told me I said, '*Oh! You brought some friends!*' and then fled the scene—but Margaret—it was bad."

"Worst case in the history of the ER probably."

He silently nodded his head yes, pouring himself a cup of coffee.
“Bad.”

I sometimes remember this lady in my thoughts and nightly prayers. I hope she's recovered. I can't imagine the wrath of our Lord and Savior being worse than an anus full of maggots, but what do I know?

Living with nut jobs, it's hard to know which stories I should tell you in these journals. In my time at the O'Connor household, we have had pet: lizards, fish, hedge hogs, flying squirrels, Oreos, cows, goats, chucker, pheasants, peacocks, normal chickens, fancy fluffy chickens, fluffy dogs, hunting dogs, horses, llamas, alpacas, mules, and a cat. Once our cat was torn open by one of our dogs and we had to staple her back together at home. Once, Dad split his head open on the side of the house, and me and Isabelle stapled his head back together at our kitchen table. Once, me, Isabelle, Dustin, and Dontavious were sitting in the hot tub when a chicken hopped up the steps and into the water, flapping and splashing around, bawking like a mad person, and everyone else screamed and laughed and splashed him away. Once, I tried to force Calvin, a three-hundred-pound goat, into the back of my Bug, but he was too fat and stubborn and couldn't fit.

My favorite memory of our home in Oregon was when I was seven years old. I was laying in the cool grass outside, staring up at the sun glinting through the leaves of the tree overhead. My cat, Nemo, was curled on my stomach, purring softly. Our Great Pyrenees lay beside me, his head under my arm. The air was thick and sweet. My mom called me in for lunch: Ramen noodles.

It's one of those memories rich with the kind of peace that can only occur in childhood.