Two Short Stories About Anxiety Disorders and Their Psychological Analyses

A thesis submitted to the Miami University Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for University Honors with Distinction

by

Bethany DeVore

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Miami University, Oxford, Ohio
ABSTRACT

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One of the difficulties facing people with Anxiety disorders is the lack of understanding from society about what they go through. This thesis is an attempt to bring Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Social Anxiety/Phobia out of textbooks and theories through short stories, with the goal of allowing readers to understand and experience the disorders at a personal level. The diagnostic criteria in the DSM-IV and other research into each disorder are incorporated through the characters’ personalities, thought patterns and reactions to their worlds, as well as the situations that brought about the development of the disorders. Each story is followed by a psychological analysis that provides a brief explanation of the disorder in clinical terms and demonstrates its presence in the story through specific examples. “The Price of New Teeth” is about the life and memories of a Korean war veteran named Russ Rockweather who developed a severe case of PTSD that arrests him in the past, unable to form meaningful relationships or make plans for the future. “Igneous” is a first person narrative about a girl named Amanda, who struggled with a social phobia that caused panic attacks regularly when she approached unfamiliar social situations. The phobia developed due to socially traumatic events earlier in her life, and an ongoing relationship with her mother that verged on verbal and emotional abuse. By the end of the tale, she has made some steps toward overcoming her fears through the kind of process involved in most methods of psychotherapy for this issue.
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Approved by:
Dr. Mia Biran
Mary Vincent
Terri Jones

Accepted by:

Director
University Honors Program
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IGNEOUS
IGNEOUS

I sit at my computer and watch a very small world passing by my window. My mother passes in and out of the apartment, and Arthur and Hilda Swanset sit in the green wooden bench-swing outside their door across the common lawn. A few small children from the apartment three doors down clamber across the chipped red monkey bars on the little playground. Too often the sun glares down from the top of the world, like a heat goblin, and it hurts my eyes, and draws everyone out of their houses. People toss baseballs and frisbees. The dogs romp in between, waiting hopefully for someone to miss their catch so they can cover the ball or disc with loving transparent slime. The slobber of dogs is very like the slime of slugs, and even dries on the grass with the same whitish, shiny streaks. They’ll never find me outside on a day like that. I go out into the world when it rains. I will toss my long red curls into the water till they straighten, and let it stream down my limbs, pool in my sandals. The streets are quiet but for the shoosh of the odd car, and no one but me walks the suburban side roads. Amanda the nymph.

“Have you sent in your application to the college yet?” I swear, my mother’s voice is more nasal than an anteater’s when she’s nagging, and the “n”s and “ou”s especially have a twang that would shame anyone who hates living in the mountains as much as I do. “The deadline is Friday.”
“Yes, mother, I put it in the mailbox about an hour ago.” I accidentally-on-purpose forgot to stamp the envelope. I hear the cow-bell on our front door clank back and forth as she goes outside. Peering out from behind the shutters, I shiver as I notice mother at the mailbox (it’s shaped like a rainbow trout), looking for the application, I guess. I wish the mailbox would digest things. Her green terrycloth bathrobe flaps in the Appalachian wind as she pulls a stamp out of the front pocket and sticks it on the envelope. I might laugh at her persistence if the idea of going to college didn’t freak me out. Her face is bland as she comes back into the house, stopping to pluck some daffodils from her garden on the way in.

“You forgot your stamp, honey, so I stuck one on for you.” She fluffs the flowers in a clear glass vase and sets them on the dining room table. I glare at her collection of white plastic elephants on the windowsill. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I hate the way you mope around in your room all day. You won’t even do that thing anymore…what was it… Book club? You moan and groan about even ordering pizza. Why don’t you just stop whining and suck it up? Myra and Wilson aren’t coming back, you know.” I’d say that speech gets an A+ for ouch. My stomach churns at the thought of going to classes with a roomful of strangers. I just don’t want to do it again.

The first time that happened still plagues my mind like the cloud of gnats that haunted the Egyptians. We moved in the middle of the school year when I
was nine, back in 1984, and my parents put me in a private Catholic school. I
didn’t want to go, but my mother dragged me into the building by the wrist. I sat
on the orange leather chair outside the principal’s office while he asked my mother
questions. “Be good,” said my mother, as her high heels clopped back out the
door. The principal walked me to the door of the third grade classroom and
introduced me to the class. I stared at the speckled green tile floor, afraid to peek
and see how the other kids were looking at me. I didn’t want them to laugh at me.
I sat in a chair on the side of the room before they brought in a desk for me, and
while the teacher was writing math problems on the blackboard, one of the boys in
the row next to me threw spitwads that stuck in my hair. Miss Green sat him
outside in the hall for 15 minutes.

Angie Holdman pulled my jeans down by the swings at recess the second
day, after I had raised my hand in class to answer a question she got wrong. I
thought at the time that the whole school probably saw that, and remembered me
into infinity as the girl who got pantsed. In retrospect, I think that was rather
obsessive, but I still turn red and squirm whenever I remember it. I never
voluntarily answered a question again while I went to that school, but fantasized
about grabbing Angie’s brown braids while she was swinging, to see whether her
hair would come out by the roots or painfully yank her off the swing into the fine
pool of dust underneath it.
Miss Green called on me sometimes, even though I wouldn’t raise my hand. I got light-headed and expected to forget everything I knew, and then turned scarlet for half an hour if I got any question wrong. I still do that, come to think of it. Some people say it’s okay to not be perfect, but I know better. My mom never let me get together with my friends if I got less than A’s on my tests. Or if the house didn’t stay clean. My friends were twins named Wilson and Myra Reichel. They wore glasses, and Wilson had more Star Trek shirts than he had underwear, and his underwear was covered in stars and planets, too. He told me, I didn’t ask, or see it, in case you were wondering. Myra wore her hair in a braid swinging down below her butt like a shiny black pendulum and whistled the Scottish National anthem at any provocation. They moved into town a year after I did, and they were my first and only friends for years.

Except for Angie and her friends, none of the other kids in our class were outright unpleasant to us, but they didn’t try to make friends, either. Myra and Wilson and I invented a world called Yirmshide in the park outside town, where we were a heroic band who traveled around getting hapless characters out of dire circumstances. I usually played a helpful gnome who found and distributed gold to the oppressed peasants and persuaded all the animals in Trisky Forest to do whatever I wanted them to do. We took turns being the people who needed our
band’s help, and would get enough into our game that sometimes we would come home too late.

“You’re late for dinner, you lazy, ungrateful child. I needed you to set the table. If you’re not home early for the next week, you can’t go off with Myra and Wilson again for a month, do you hear?” My dad had left my mother the year after we moved, and my mother and I lived alone in an apartment outside Wheeling. It was my fault my parents split up. My mother never fails to remind me that I was too much of a burden for my father to want to stay around and watch me grow up, and that she only puts up with me out of the excellence of her heart. I’m sure it’s true, but I always look forward to spending the summer with my dad. He encouraged me to take art classes, which were usually the highlight of my year. I would come home and show Myra and Wilson my paintings, and they would hang them up in their rooms since my mother didn’t want them in her house.

As bad as the cliques in elementary school were, high school was worse. All the divisions of people are set in stone in high school, with little to no intermingling between them. But Wilson and Myra and I were lucky, because there were more people at the public high school that enjoyed creating fantasy worlds like we did. So we had the makings of our own clique from some of the people in the art and creative writing classes, and prided ourselves in not being
exclusive to people cast out by the jocks and cheerleaders, the academics and partiers. We started a fiction club, and it met in Wilson and Myra’s basement. They had a black wrap-around couch, a limestone fireplace, and navy blue shag carpet in that room, and we played, wrote and illustrated stories, and read books aloud chapter by chapter. All the books our clique went through are sitting in the cherry-wood bookshelf beneath my window.

Anyway, cliques oppress me, and to break into them takes time, effort, and more courage than I have. I’ve heard stories of how bad they are at the college I just applied to, and I don’t want to go. Talking to people who have set groups makes me feel like an alien with three eyes, who is trying to disguise itself as an Earthling but can’t escape the horrified or derisive reactions of the humanoids. I can’t get conversations started and keep them going, so I must be a boring person. Every time I try to talk to someone I don’t know, it feels like I’m using my head as a battering ram against the dark beams of a dungeon door, and all the muscles that knot all through my back grow more tense, edging me toward a migraine. That is, unless I already know most of the other people I’m with, because then I’m comfortable talking to one new person at a time.

I wish Myra and Wilson were still around. The U-Haul pulled up to their house the summer before senior year, and their house regurgitated their belongings into the trash can of that trailer. It was left with a hungry stomach, waiting for
another family to devour. That spring Myra had cut her hair to shoulder length
and crossed the prep world barrier, though she and I still wrote science fiction and
fantasy stories together in our spare time. She ran for president of our senior class.
I painted posters of her face smiling the way she did when something surprised
her… her head tilted to the side and teeth showing, with her slogan, “Laugh,
Learn, and Live.” People said the posters won her election, but then she moved
before she could take office.

Since Myra and Wilson left, I often hyperventilate when I have to talk to
people I don’t know, and it must be noticeable enough to frighten people away.
So I try to not put myself in those situations. Mother keeps telling me that there’s
nothing to be afraid of, and to stop whining and suck it up, because everyone will
think I’m a freak if I keep to myself so much. She’s probably right, but people
always psych themselves out. I can’t do much about it, so I don’t even try. I
study and go to our fiction club meetings, which were reassigned to one of the
rooms at school. We pretty much went through the motions then, because there’s
nothing like a sterile classroom to quench creativity. I still sometimes spend time
with the other people that Myra and Wilson and I adopted into our group, but
nothing is all that much fun now that they’ve moved to Accident. I think that’s a
ridiculous name for a town. Yet another reason to dislike living in the
Appalachians. So I shut myself in my room most of the time so my mother can
still have the apartment to herself as much as possible, and I talk to people in the Middle Earth chatroom.

As a graduation present, one of my friends from there sent me a sword with a Chinese dragon hilt that’s hanging on the wall next to my window. His screen name is asian_elf_lord, and I think his real name is Ryan. Wilson and I talk on the computer all the time, too. He’s taking an online course in computer engineering, and Myra is starting at the University of West Virginia with a major in Creative Writing in the Fall. And now (thanks but no thanks, mother), I will be going to college, too. I got my acceptance letter out of the trout’s belly on Thursday, and mother actually gave me a hug after she walked in and took off her flamingo-colored high heels. Of course, that was before I told her I’m going to major in art. Since then she’s not spoken to me except to find fault, or try to make me switch into business or law. I don’t think there’s a speck of dust in a square mile that escapes her sight, and the presence of every one is a mark against me.

Today is Monday, March 26th. I’ve been two months at this college now, and I have more bad days than good ones. My independent study in Asian Art techniques is my favorite class, and I made myself a painted bamboo screen for my room, which serves as the door to my closet. Right now I have to go to ceramics class at the community college up the road. It’s a sad collection of
cement block buildings surrounded by limp grass and twiggy bits of wood that they call trees. Before my mother drives me over, I sit on my bed and breathe IN and ouuuuuuuuuut and IN and ouuuuuuuuuut, my knee jouncing up and down without ceasing. My heart hurts, because it’s acting like I’ve been out sprinting for three hours again. Everyone will look at me if I walk into the room like this, so I have to be early and get a table first. Maybe no one will sit with me today if I can choose where I’m sitting, and I can just work on my teapot in silence. I try and concentrate on the ways that you throw a pot on the wheel, and do the same to myself. Center it. Keep centering it. I get in the car.

The classroom smells like the creek under the clay cliffs I discovered in King’s Park. I’m later than I wanted to be, but the table nearest the door is still empty. I sit down. My hair is the same color as the Arizona sunsets, my ceramics teacher tells me. She’s just come back from her trip to the Grand Canyon over spring break, and everyone but me seems to be looking tan, either from lying out in the sun or cheating and baking their skin off in the smarmy tanning beds in downtown Wheeling. The four girls at the table by the window all group together and talk to no one else, unless the former high school track stars come over from the corner table to flirt. The girls over there have drug-store blonde hair, and alternate what color of pastel Abercrombie and Fitch shirts they wear every week.
“Nice shirt, Amanda,” one of them says to me. There are explosions of laughter disguised as sneezes from the other three, and I just roll my eyes. The shirt is a gray and blue tie-dye, and my jeans are covered in paint handprints from people in the 70s. *At least my clothes have a story, not an advertisement,* I think to myself. I want to say it, but my heart is beating like a helicopter already, and my lungs feel like they’re going to cave in on themselves, so I just drag my pencil around on the paper to draw four ugly gravestones instead.

Bitchiness must be a fake blonde syndrome, because every once in a while you’ll meet a blonde girl who’s nice. And if you do, it’s 10,000 to one that they never have to dye their hair. In fact, I don’t know that I’ve ever met a mean natural blonde, but the dyed blondes are like Venus fly-traps. They look cool and beautiful (if you like that sort of look, cause I don’t), and act sweet until they get you to trust them, but they’ll turn on you sometimes before your back is turned. The girls at the window table are a case in point. You have to be careful in high school, though, because a lot of the girls who will dye their hair blonde as soon as they leave for college have parents who are still wise enough to try and correct their character by forbidding the fake hair. Maybe I should switch my major from art to psychology and study the bitchiness quality of fake blondes as opposed to natural blondes as opposed to brunettes and redheads.
I mash pieces of charcoal into the clay pot I’ve made using the slab technique, leaving the teapot until last. The pattern is reminiscent of the shadows underneath the round bales of hay that look like wooly mammoths grazing in the fields. I pluck them out again with an exacto-knife and put the pieces back in their Ziploc bag. My heart rate slows to a near normal pace as I concentrate on my fingers smoothing the rim of the pot evenly all around. I hear a volley of angry whispers from the window table and glance up with a return of the fear that I was working on banishing. Andrew Young, who has dark blonde hair (naturally, though the rule about bitchy blondes doesn’t necessarily apply across gender lines) and plays lacrosse in the school’s intramurals, is walking over from the corner table. He sits down at my table with a scraping sound, and begins to roll his clay out into ¼ inch thick worms on the table across from me. I poke at my clay with my fingers and look through it for streaks. I want to enjoy the jealousy of the girls near the window, but he’s probably going to think I’m as freaky as all the rest of them. And he might make fun of me when he leaves. And I don’t want to incur the wrath of the window ladies after all, because I have another two months of this ceramics class.

“It’s Amanda, isn’t it?” I nod. “Did you do anything for Spring Break?” I shake my head. “I missed the last day of class before spring break. What did we
“Nothing.” I try a little harder. “She let us work on our independent projects.” My knees are getting jumpy again, and I press my hands down on them, putting clay handprints on my jeans, on top of some of the paint ones. He seems willing to talk if I would talk to him too, but I sit here with a weight on my chest that frightens me. I can only look away and trace the cracks on the table, cut wedges from the clay and jam them against one another. He nods and doesn’t seem to notice that I’m uncomfortable, which helps me calm down a little bit.

“Where did you go for spring break?” I ask him.

“Seattle. My brother lives out there, and he and his wife just had a baby last month. So I got to meet my nephew, and it was grand. It did nothing but rain all week, but I suppose it’s normal out there.” He talks about the flight and the turbulence over the Rocky Mountains. I’ve never seen them, so he describes skiing and what Yellowstone is like. “Take the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen, and multiply by 10.”

My breathing slows down a bit more as he keeps talking. He winds his clay worms into four springs held apart from one another by wire and attaches them to a small squashed ball. Then it all becomes a body with the springs as arms and legs as he adds a head with a rat’s nose, a basset hound’s ears, and eyes like a
toad, poking up over everything. He picks it up and starts it bouncing around.

“Come fer a bounce, m’lady?” He wiggles his eyebrows up and down with the
figure, and one of the springs salutes me. I start to giggle, the hole in my stomach
dissipating, and he grins. “I knew we’d get along.”

He sits at my table every day now, and we waste time taking turns making
claymation figures to see who can come up with the most bizarre creation. The
professor thinks they’re great, and won’t let us destroy them, so we have a
collection of weird statues in the window to be fired. So today I get up to leave
class, and Andrew walks with me to the door. “Hey, I have something I want to
ask you about. You know the Festival of the Arts that’s coming up in May?” I
nod and grin. His hair is sticking up in the back where he accidentally got blue
glaze in it, but he doesn’t know it. “Well, I was wondering if we could enter it
together with our statues. I’m not any good at writing, but you said you did a lot
of that in high school. So maybe if you write a story about our characters, that
could be part of the exhibit. Dr. Kelly would let us do that for our final project if
we got in. I already asked her.”

“Do you think they’re good enough?” I wrinkle my nose. “I don’t know.
What if people don’t like them, and no one comes our booth? What if they think
we’re incompetent artists and don’t belong? I don’t know if I can talk to people
about our work. I’ll freeze up. And probably hyperventilate.” I pull on one of the
curls hanging over my shoulder until the roots hurt.

Andrew just drapes his arm over my shoulders. “Calm down, dear. I’ll be
with you on this one, hey? You’re the brains behind the operation and will make
it a success, if you’ll just let me be chief initiator and go-between.” He kicks my
sandal off my foot as we’re walking and scampers away. “Come on, Cinderella.
I’ll take you home.” I believe him in spite of myself, but I’m not going to tell my
mother yet. I bring home my clay and make three creatures. One is a dancing
dragon with donkey’s ears and a foolish grin. I think that will make a fun story.
When I get on my computer, Wilson is online, and I tell him Andrew’s idea. He
says he’s sure that I can make it amazing, and promises to come if it works out.
Wilson is such a good friend. I’m going to give him some of my statues. I
wonder if Myra will come with him when he comes.

My mother walks in the door of my room while I’m talking to Wilson.
“What are these atrocious things? Don’t get any of that clay on the carpet.” She
drums her fingers on my screen and glares at me. “I went to pick you up at the
college and you were gone. Who the hell brought you home?”

“A friend from my ceramics class, mother.” I let all my hair fall down
across my face as I bend to untie my three-year old Nikes. I see the calligraphy
pen I thought I lost last month, and stretch beneath my desk to grab it. She kicks my chair and I jump, hitting my head on the desk.

“What kind of a friend? Who is it? Why didn’t you contact me? And why the hell don’t you major in something practical?” Hell is one of those words that people like my mother, who create hells themselves, overuse in order to bring condemnation into the lives of people around them.

“Look, mother, it’s my friend Andrew, okay? He and I are entering an art show together for our final project in ceramics. I tried to call you, but you weren’t here. He just brought me home. Good grief.” I rub the bump on my head, and I feel my eyes water. “Were you worried? I’m sorry.”

“No, but you wasted my time. Don’t look for rides to or from college anymore. Find your own way or don’t go. Unless you change your damned major.” She slams my door hard enough that the goldfish on my desk is startled and darts beneath the castle, burying itself in blue gravel. I hear the cowbell ring furiously as she bangs the front door, too, and the floor trembles. I run to the window and watch her speed away in her red Nissan, the weeds the neighbor raked to the side of the road yesterday flying behind her for twenty feet. The gray clouds skidding across the sky get darker. I jam a Lake Michigan baseball cap on my head and flee the house. I walk about a hundred yards down the road when the wind suddenly blasts hard from the west, bringing horizontal rain with it.
Lightning tears up the sky and I scream into the thunder. I’m crying, too, but the rain makes it easier to hide. It feels like blunt pins, the wind is blowing so hard. My hair is lashing my face like a braided whip, and the soft curls are already flattened out. I don’t feel like a nymph. I feel like a hag who’s been cast out of society for ugliness and condemned to live with a fiend who doesn’t like her but won’t let her leave.

“God, don’t ever let me be like my mother!” I yell into the wind. A car drives by and swishes through the puddles already forming in the tracks of the road. It stops and backs up. It’s Andrew, and he opens the passenger door on his car.

“Amanda! What are you doing out in this weather? It’s not warm enough for this yet! Here, get in. I was just coming to see you.” I shake my head, though I do suddenly feel the cold of wind and water seeping through my skin toward my bones like a drip slowly expanding on a sponge.

“I’m sopping. I’ll soak your car. I’ll walk and meet you back at my house.” I close the door on his concerned scowl and walk back. I haven’t seen that look on his face before, and it makes me feel safe like I haven’t felt since Wilson and Myra left. He passes me and goes into my house without knocking. He has set tea brewing by the time I walk into the door.
“Go get something warm and dry on, and then we’ll talk.” I obey him and get into navy blue fleece pants and a green fleece pullover, which feel even warmer and softer than usual because of the cold. I throw all my wet clothes into the washing machine and meet him where he’s sitting in the kitchen. I see that while I was changing, he had brought in all of the statues we’d made at school. “I thought you would need these to see what characters we have for our story. I have to make a confession, too. The application date for being in the art show was last week.” He looks down at the table and pushes at a flaw in the wood stain.

“Oh. So we’re too late.” I sigh. He can’t hide his mischievous smirk, though, and grins up at me.

“No, I just mean that I had already taken pictures of our statues and entered them before I asked you. Do you mind?” I sort of smile back.

“Well, you got me to agree to it already, so no.”

“Your eyes are puffy. What happened since this afternoon?” I tell him, and his eyes narrow. He clenches his fist around a wad of clay, which spurts out through his fingers. “That woman! Hey, don’t even worry about it. You don’t know how close I live. It’s hardly five miles further to come get you and bring you to school, and that…that… that is, your mother, will see that she can’t treat you like her property.”
Andrew shows up like clockwork every day at 8:00 and brings me home at five. We work on the exhibit at his house on Mondays and Thursdays. His house is the typical suburban house—a two-story rectangle of red brick with a white garage, and white trimmed windows, flowerbeds with yew and tulips, and a maple tree in the front yard. On those nights his mom always brings us dinner in the clay-room, as we’ve dubbed the corner in his garage where we work. She’s a lovely woman with black hair and blue eyes. I didn’t freak out the first time I met her, even though I thought I was going to. Andrew probably warned her that I tend to be afraid of getting to know new people, so to not treat me like a stranger. Myra will turn out as beautiful and kind, I think, when she’s a mom.

On the day of the Festival of Arts, we load all our glazed statues, the layers of card tables and tablecloths, the laminated pages of the twenty-three page story, and our bag of new clay (in case people want to watch the creative process) into Andrew’s dad’s Ford pickup truck. Wilson said he’d meet us at the festival. We set everything up at 10 a.m., arranging all the statues into scenes of the story ranging all around the horse-shoe arrangements of our card tables. At noon, people start arriving. I start warming up the clay by throwing it down and working it between my hands, while he stands and looks at everyone with his brown eyes. Some people start looking at the statues, saying they love them, and ask if they can
pick them up, how did we come up with the ideas. He points them to the
beginning of the story and shows how to read it in sequence. He tells which
figurines were mine, that I wrote the story, and did most of the glazing. I mutter
against myself as the people laugh and move around the exhibit, reading the story
and looking at the statues. This is a ridiculous thing for me to be doing. The story
must be cliché, the figurines aren’t well done enough, and most of the glaze is
-cracked.

The air smells like dust and sun, and I duct tape the tablecloths to the tables
to keep them from blowing around. The laughing makes my heart sink and hurt,
and I wish I was anywhere but here. However, when people get through, they
come to me and ask how I came up with such a creative plot, and if I’ve published
it anywhere. One woman asks me if she can commission me to write a story for
her kids, and make a few clay pieces to go with it. She wants to pay me whatever
I’ll let her. I can’t believe my ears, and Andrew doesn’t come to rescue me, so I
answer the questions with monosyllables at first. I hear Andrew talking about my
artistic genius and try to signal him to stop, it’s not true, but he looks at the tables,
the visitor, the sky and won’t see my finger slashing across my neck. He just
keeps grinning and pushing the hair out of his eyes. I feel almost like I’m standing
outside of myself at first when words start tumbling off my tongue to people I
don’t know. People are friendly, and I keep talking. Can this be me?
Suddenly Wilson and my father walk through the crowd and give me hugs across the table where I’m working on making a duck with talons for an 8 year old. I almost start crying, but hop up and down instead. I introduce them to Andrew, and they smile and nod and shake hands. Then there are too many people at our booth, and I don’t have time to talk to Wilson and Dad. My heart is pounding like it does when I’m panicky, but I’m more excited. I keep talking to stranger after stranger, feeling powerful and confident. I have never felt this way around a group of people I don’t know. I talk. I skip. I make clay figurines, and I know people are appreciating them. Not even my mother makes me feel bad when she comes and sniffs at the arrangement on our table, because she does in fact stop long enough to read the story, even though my father was around, and I don’t talk to her. Andrew hovers near me, looking tense and ready to pounce if she makes any comments, but she doesn’t. The judges say they think the dragon with the donkey ears is one of the funniest things they’ve seen.

We win first in the synthesis of the arts category, and first in the humor section that was added this year. Andrew looks wicked and motions me to make the speech. I step up to the microphone. I feel light as a nymph even though I’m about to do something I always dreaded. “I just wanted to let you all know that this is the first speech I’ve ever made.” Cheers. “I have a few people that I need to thank. First, I want to thank my Father, who made sure I got art lessons during
the summers I stayed with him growing up.” There is clapping, and my father beams and waves. “And my dear friends Wilson and Myra, who I grew up writing stories with.” Wilson curtsies and bats his eyelashes, making me laugh. “And finally, my muse Andrew, who was the one who had the idea for everything in the first place, and without whom I would never have had the motivation or courage to do this by myself, even if I had thought of it.” Andrew laughs over the cheers and pulls my hair, waving to the crowd who is laughing and cheering and clapping. We run off the stage with our ribbons and a check for three hundred dollars, and I feel delirious.

My mother comes up to me, wearing a sun hat bigger than Hawaii.

“Honey, you didn’t thank me.”

“I have nothing to thank you for.” I turn away and walk off with Dad and Wilson and Andrew, who grabs my hand and won’t let go when I tug it. The sun makes my hair look like lava, and I feel as if all the molten rock is being released now from a shell that was under pressure. I wonder what it will be like when it cools. But I take a bow to the world.

END
IGNEOUS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
**Igneous: A Psychological Analysis**

Social Phobia has fewer blatant outward manifestations than some of the other anxiety disorders, and thus the story “Igneous” is a first person narrative in which Amanda’s thoughts are laid out as they occur within the events in her world. Social phobia’s official definition in the DSM-IV is “a marked and persistent fear of one or more social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny of others” (898).

Usually the fear takes the form of obsessing about doing something that might embarrass, humiliate, or draw unwanted negative attention to the victim. The most common situations mentioned in the DSM-IV for eliciting these feelings are when meeting new people or interacting with acquaintances (especially in unfamiliar surroundings), speaking publicly or formally, talking to people in authority or standing up for oneself (898). To qualify as a phobia, the symptoms must occur frequently and result in avoidance of the situation, though sometimes the presence of a familiar person will decrease the fear reaction. Also, the phobic individual must suffer a reduction in his or her quality of life because of the anxiety, and it lasts longer than six months. Social phobia usually develops from either some socially traumatic event, or from authoritarian parents who use shame...
as a disciplinary tool and instill a hyper-consciousness of the opinions of others in the child.

Amanda’s social problems are deeply rooted from childhood for two reasons. The main shaping ingredient for the development of her phobia is her caustic relationship with her mother. The use of shame as a disciplinary action, and the amount of demand placed on Amanda for perfection and conformity by her mother drove childhood shyness into obsessive thoughts and panic attacks when it came to interacting with, or being evaluated by, other people.

“It was my fault my parents split up. My mother never fails to remind me that I was too much of a burden for my father to want to stay around and watch me grow up, and that she only puts up with me out of the excellence of her heart… Mother keeps telling me that there’s nothing to be afraid of, and to stop whining and suck it up, because everyone will think I’m a freak if I keep to myself so much.”

Amanda’s mother is uptight and somewhat verbally abusive, requiring much of Amanda from a young age.

However, to complicate the issue, she also underwent a socially traumatic experience when she was nine years old in a new school, and this affects her later interactions and inhibitions throughout her school years.

“I sat in a chair on the side of the room before they brought in a desk for me, and while the teacher was writing math problems on the blackboard, one of the boys in the row next to me threw spitwads that stuck in my hair. Miss Green sat him outside in the hall for 15 minutes. Angie Holdman pulled my jeans down by the swings at recess the second day, after I had raised my hand in class to answer a question she got wrong. I thought at the time that the whole school probably saw that, and remembered me into infinity as the girl who got pantsed. In retrospect, I think that was rather obsessive, but I still turn red and squirm whenever I remember it.”

The overgeneralization that the whole school had seen what happened, and the continued obsessive reaction to the memory both contribute to the development
and continuation of phobic thought patterns. Amanda’s recognition that the anxiety she feels may be an unreasonable response to the situation is also one of the DSM IV symptoms required for diagnosis as a disorder.

The height of the phobia develops in Amanda when she is about 17, and her two friends move away. This removal of her “security blanket” prompts the full-blown emergence of a social phobia from what had mostly been an excessive shyness. She develops panic attacks with an accelerated heart rate, hyperventilation, and the nervous jumping of her knees. Talking to unfamiliar people is the most common trigger for the panic attacks, a fact that she recognizes. This phobia occurs nearly nine years after her first traumatic experiences, when her father left and the kids at school picked on her. This time span is the average distance in time between the origin of fears and the emergence of the disorder.

Highly creative people often tend to be sensitive to the criticism and evaluation of others (Bassett, 77) which is in keeping with Amanda being both an artist and a writer. Her tendency to isolate herself in her own fantasy world represents a typical behavior among socially anxious individuals in general, as well. Social phobics usually aren’t completely without social skills, and generally don’t have a problem with interaction in small groups once the initial barriers are somehow breached. This is why Amanda is able to have friends in Myra, Wilson, and Andrew.
The negative thoughts and exaggerated imagination of the things that could go wrong are some of the manifestations of the phobia. Amanda’s thoughts tend to dwell in negative anticipation of evaluation by others, which makes her anxious before she even gets into the situation.

“Before my mother drives me over, I sit on my bed and breathe IN and ouuuuuuuut and IN and ouuuuuuuut, my knee jouncing up and down without ceasing. My heart hurts, because it’s acting like I’ve been out sprinting for three hours again. Everyone will look at me if I walk into the room like this, so I have to be early and get a table first… he’s probably going to think I’m as freaky as all the rest of them. And he might make fun of me when he leaves.”

Some of her negative thoughts about other people (like the girls with the fake blonde hair) are defenses against giving any validity to the negative evaluations of that group. This defense mechanism is called rationalization. In order that she can discount the girls making fun of her clothes and not internalize the insults, she puts them in a category that deserves disdain.

Social phobia is an intensely frustrating disorder for those that suffer from it, and the isolation that often occurs with those individuals is neither healthy nor satisfying for them. Amanda is one example of someone with social phobia who discovers that she has more internal resources and less to fear than she had previously believed. The hopeful ending of the story is intended to show that there is potential for overcoming the phobia through situational exposure, where positive outcomes may override the negativity of previous expectations. This is the technique primarily used in most types of psychotherapy addressing the issue
of social phobia, though the whole healing process takes much longer than can be shown in the story with Amanda.
THE PRICE OF NEW TEETH
Russ Rockweather stepped off the plane onto U.S. soil for the first time in three years on February 13, 1954, a free man. Although he was only 26 years old, his forehead had two deep furrows now, and his dark brown hair was dusted in gray, but he was home. He stood straight and glanced around the airport terminal, astonished to see no American flags, much less a welcome for the Korean War Veterans. He was wearing his uniform, but only one woman came rushing to meet him, her brown hair jiggling up and down in time with her breasts. She stopped short right as he started to move toward her with a smile, and her face drooped as she got a closer view of his face. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I thought you were someone else." But she held out her hand for him to shake before moving to look at the rest of the returning soldiers.

Russ climbed into a taxi whose seats leaked stuffing. "1532 South 100th Street, please." The taxi driver had a frizzy beard yellowed by tobacco, and large purple lips that wouldn't stop talking about the Yankees' last season. Russ clenched his fists, finger by finger, and let up again. When he got out at Granny Fisher's Antique store, it was boarded up, and graffiti blossomed on the walls. He ripped the boards off the door frame and let himself in with the spare key that was still left under the loose cement of the fifth step. The dusty walls sent back echoes through the room, containing only empty shelves, a broken crate, and the tracks of
mice through the dust. [Granny, I’m home. Like I promised.] Russ turned in aimless circles, leaving a confused pattern in the dust before wandering back through the rest of the store to the kitchen.

The old white vinyl table with the folding ends was still in the corner next to the window. The refrigerator was gone, and the window boarded up. He tore those boards off, too, and the light swirled through the dust into the room. The furniture in the bedrooms was covered in plastic, which the mice had reduced to rags, as well as the cushions on the chair and mattress in Granny's room. He went outside to a pay-phone at the 7-11 across the street and asked for the number to the Dove Funeral Home.

"Hello, Dove's Funeral Services." The woman sounded frazzled.

He swallowed. "Have you a record of Gr--Doris Wilcox Fisher?" A file drawer opened on the other end of the line, and he heard the shuffling of papers. An ant crawled up the side of the phone, and he smashed it with his thumb.

"Yes. She's in Acacia Park. I'm sorry." He hung up the phone and shuffled back across the street into the old antique store with the apartment in the back. Russ sat down on an old kitchen chair and pounded his head into the table. "Damn it!" He gnashed his teeth as tears turned the dust on the table into mud.
January 1, 1952. There was nothing in the cell but one striped bed to share among six men, and a hole that reeked of human waste. The rats that scurried around their ankles day to day didn’t have the courtesy to shit in the hole. Russ had been here for a long time, almost since he arrived in Korea as part of a small training force before the war. The sudden attack by the North Korean People's Army that left the Republic of Korea nearly defenseless had scattered his troop, most dead.

During the beatings, all of the prisoners concentrated on the grit that ricocheted between their teeth, or which of the piles of rat shit were still waiting to be squashed. Always at least one man in cell 237 was counting the seconds to find when the days turned, whatever else was happening. Having six of them made for even four-hour shifts unless someone died and they were waiting for a replacement. There were five now.

The layers of fresh and partially healed bruises mottled their skin like the shadows in the deep forest. The other POWs in the prison called Russ "Survivor." His emaciated frame looked as if it would break, but he had survived the constant beatings for longer than everyone else in the cell block had even been prisoners. Most times he didn’t move at all--only stared at his hands and his feet, watching
the thin blue veins popping out little by little as he gripped each finger into a fist and relaxed them again.

Every day as he ate his watery soup and moldy bread he thought of Granny Fisher's iced tea and cookies the day he signed up for the army. He almost smiled at the memory of his promise to her when he was a kid. "Promise me you'll see the world, Russ," she had said. "Don't you dare get stuck here the rest of your life in Chicago." Her red checked apron fluttered as she bustled between kitchen and the store counter. Granny Fisher had owned an antique store. Her store smelled like potpourri and aged wood, a quiet haven from the baked cement and chaos in the streets. Smiling like he was her son, a tall glass of iced tea in one hand and a plate of cookies in the other, every afternoon since he was ten.

"I won't, Granny, I swear. I'm going to join the army and see the world, and then go to college. And then I'll make lots of money and buy a house and all your antiques, and you'll come live with me." He wiped the crumbs off his hands and dashed out to play basketball on the asphalt court across the street.

The day he left, he showed off his uniform to her and his friends, and she made peanut butter cowboy cookies with brown M&Ms on top to celebrate his leaving the slums of Chicago. Maybe now she tried to send him packages that supplied the post-master's children with extras. She'd put in more M&Ms, a Frank Sinatra record, packages of yellow and red Kool Aid, because all the other colors
tasted fake. Maybe there would be a tin of cocoa you could make with water, and tea. There would be a letter in pristine cursive telling how the antique store was struggling to stay in business, and what kind of trouble his friends were in now. How glad she was that he wasn't trapped in the city, and that she prayed for his safety every day. How she wondered why she hadn't heard from him.

* * * *

Russ wore his uniform to the Acacia Park Cemetery. Doris Wilcox Fisher, September 17, 1868- January 8, 1953. He went to the Navy Pier on Lake Michigan at sunset, standing between two piles of soiled snow to watch the undulating water. It looked like a whole sea of old blood and oil in the half-darkness. "Fuck!" He threw the key to her store off the pier. That night he slept in a Salvation Army shelter surrounded by ragged men who smelled of cheap whiskey and wet newspaper. They had run out of beds, so he spent the night on the floor with a blanket. A big black man slept next to him, snoring loudly, his head and shoulders sticking out from underneath the blanket. Russ curled up in a ball and ground his teeth all night as shadows crowded his dreams.

* * * *

The boots of three guards clumped and echoed down the row, prodding a brown barge of a man, his black hair standing out as if it had been electrified, and his nose like a baby hawk's. The prison issue suit stretched across his chest like
elastic, and four inches of arm and leg were visible after its cuffs. The keys of the head guard rattled in the lock of cell 237, and opened the cranking door. The other guards shoved the man inside with a whack of his arms, and the door slammed and locked behind him. "Herman Horace," he said to the other men, whose eyes drifted lazily across him. Silence. Russ's eyes looked like blank glass as he stared at his hands.

"You blind or something?" Herman waved his brown hand with two-by-four fingers in front of the watery blue eyes. The next second, Herman was on the floor with his hand pressed up between his shoulder blades and Russ's foot grinding into the small of his back. He quivered like an anxious cat as his face flattened some of the piles of rat droppings. "I didn't mean nothing," he pleaded. Herman's eyes bulged like twin spider bites, all black, brown and bloodshot as he tried to look around at his frail captor.

Russ's teeth were dull yellow like overgrown mustard seeds, all rounded off on the ends by the grit he chewed on during the beatings. "You will not talk to me. You will not talk to them." He jerked his head at the four other men who were watching idly and sitting on the one bed on the other end of the cell. One man's fingers tightened one by one against the bed-frame and released, ticking patterns to keep track of the seconds. "You get beat less the less friends you have, the less talking you do. We want to survive, and you do too, so you'll play by our rules or
we'll kill you ourselves." He removed his foot from Herman's back but left his arm twisted behind him.

"Naw, Naw, I be quiet." Herman's wrist was abruptly released, and Russ sat down again and stared at his hands. A broken blood vessel in his ankle had spread out from the sharp corners of his leg bones like cobwebs under the skin.

*   *   *   *

In the morning when he woke up, the black man had already left, and the blanket was folded on the front desk. Russ returned his own blanket, and went to sign up for a job as a street sweeper. A vast gray fog blanketed his future when he tried to think past the day.

*   *   *   *

April 5, 1956. The sun drove away what little dew there was on the tattered cars and trees choking among the broken cement in the streets. Russ's hair curled about his shoulders and got in his eyes when he bent to sweep trash into his bin. A youngish woman with tired eyes and nervous, sparrow-like hands stood at a broken gate by the sidewalk where he was working, her hair flopping across her shoulders like a beaver skin. Two children played in the little yard behind her. "Thank you for cleaning the street," she said. One of the hands flitted to the latch, hesitating, and then hovered down again. "My boys haven't cut themselves on broken glass since you've been in the neighborhood, Mr.--"
"Rockweather. Russ." She extended her right hand toward him, and his gaze bounced between her face and hand twice before he removed his hand from his glove and barely touched it to hers. Her hand was cold and dry, with deep dirt stains in the wrinkles at the knuckles. Russ thought it felt like a dried fish, and put his hand back in his glove. She smiled at him. Her teeth were nice. He ran his tongue along his own rounded teeth, some missing, and went back to sweeping the walk.

"I'm Grace Miller," she said. "Come back at your lunch break and eat with us?" He shrugged, but she smiled again. "Noon?"

"Okay." He watched the dirt mill around beneath his broom, coaxing it off the cement down the rest of the block. Grace carried water or lemonade to the gate when she saw him out the window every day after that, and sometimes asked him to come in for a sandwich.

"I know Rick's finally gone forever, now, I got the divorce papers in the mail today…the boys are getting bullied at school…my mother's in the hospital in Tampa again…Where were you stationed when you were in Korea?" She always held out her dead-fish hand for him to shake when he said goodbye after their conversations, and he would touch it unless she asked him questions about Korea. Then he just walked away. She took the hint, and stopped asking.
At night he would lie in bed for hours without sleep. He never thought about Grace then, except to wonder if he might sleep more if he could think about her. It was the heavy silence that made every muscle in his body tense, and he lay with his eyes open, scrutinizing the shadows for movement, sometimes jumping out of bed to crouch cat-like on the ground when he thought he heard feet gliding through wet grass or saw the flash of the barrels of guns in the dark. Finally, Russ bought a clock with a loud second hand, and set it next to his pillow at night. The soporific click tick click tick swelled through his mind as he drifted into slumber.

*   *   *   *   *

_Herman sat down behind him on the floor as Russ kept track of the seconds._

One hour, twenty-seven minutes and thirty-one seconds of his four-hour time-keeping shift had gone by. Thirty-two. Thirty-three. The tally of days from the beginning of his imprisonment was one year and 64 days, scratched with a fork into the mold and algae on the walls. _He used Herman's back as a wall to lean against._ Snores, footsteps, and shouts of anger or pain echoed intermittently through the night, but cell 237 was as silent at night as it was during the day.

*   *   *   *   *

On New Year's Eve, Grace invited him over, and he brought a bottle of whiskey and mulled orange juice. He'd already had four shots by the time he arrived, but even so, he hesitated at the gate, looking back and forth between the
dreary light in the kitchen window the darkness of the street the way he had come. The darkness looked more inviting than the light that seemed to glide and separate from itself. He swayed and blinked. Snow drifted around his feet as he stood, the wind grating on his face. When Grace opened the door, he had been there twenty minutes. She was wearing a black evening dress that hung on her bony frame like curtains.

"Russ, how long have you been standing there? It's damned cold out. Come on in!" He shuffled down the rest of the walk, and stood next to her. Grace's hair smelled like lavender, and glistened in waves around her face. He thought he wanted to push it away and kiss her. "John and Brent are at a friend's house tonight." She took his hand and pulled him into the house. As she shut the door behind him, the sagging vinyl floor and yellowing pin-striped wallpaper suddenly seemed to be closing in around him, and he winced. His breathing shallowed, and he gasped in a deep breath, trying to set his breathing and heart rate back to normal. Grace looked over at him in surprise. "Russ? Are you okay?"

He nodded, but he felt his head beginning to swell and his stomach churn.

Russ fought against the chains that held him to the wall, nausea rising in his throat. His heart felt like a jackhammer inside his ribcage. His comrade-in-arms, Randy Saunders, was strapped into a chair, gulping down the animal screams that threatened to break from his lips. Blood was gushing from his hands.
where his fingernails had been removed, and his head was swollen and also trickling blood from a gash above his eyebrow. His striped uniform was blotched with blood and dirt. The interrogator asked Russ again, "Where were your troops based? Tell me or your friend dies." One of the guards bludgeoned Randy in the back and grinned at Russ.

Russ started. The day before, that same guard had stood in front of their cell door, grinning. Randy had come back from one of the "therapy" sessions, as they nicknamed them, with a dislocated shoulder that made his arm flop around three inches lower than the arm on the other side. Russ grabbed the joint.

Russ jumped and shrank away from Grace as she moved to touch his arm. She looked hurt. He groaned and backed to the other side of the room.

The whole arm felt loose in his hand, and he felt around for the empty socket under the muscle and sinews that slid around under his touch like bait leeches in a bucket. He pulled the joint back toward the hole, feeling the ball of bone grind across the rim of the socket, and then its settling into the center. He stood to the side and placed his fist against Randy's shoulder, ready to hammer it with his other hand to drive it back into place. "Randy, bite down on something, will you? This is gonna hurt like shit." Randy clenched his jaw and shrugged his good shoulder. "One...Two..."
Randy slammed the heel of his right hand into his fist, and the joint popped back into place. Randy gasped and punched Russ in the jaw, knocking him against the bars, then hugged him fiercely. “Thanks. Sorry man.” They had looked up to see the guard standing and watching through the bars, his hands caressing his gun. He’d looked them both in the eyes and leered in satisfaction before he walked away.

Russ glared at the walls without looking at Grace. “If we get close, they might use you to get to me. They can't do that again. I won't let them.” He swayed and peered around the room, swatting at invisible hands before slumping over on his elbows, his head on the counter.

Russ spat on the guard as he struggled in the chains, unable to draw his eyes off the scene. The interrogator kicked him in the groin, and his eyes went dark as he doubled over with pain. He tried to remember where their troops had actually been based, but seeing the rivulets of Randy's blood gather into the cracks in the concrete and flow toward the partially clogged drain, his mind drew a blank. When he looked up again, a guard was drawing a knife across Randy's throat. “NO! WAIT!” Randy's eyes glassed over and his mouth hung open as the throbbing red waterfalls created a flash flood in the concrete cracks. Russ vomited and hung like a lined fish from his chains, his limbs shaking in shock.
"But you're not in Korea! They can't touch you! They can't touch me either, damn it!" Grace shouted in frustration, pounding her hands on the back of the faded blue couch. Russ took another swig of whiskey to stop the room from its shrinking. Grace tried to approach and put her arms around him. He shoved her away, and threw the whiskey bottle on the floor, watching it shatter. The room started to return to normal, but he felt as if an anvil was sitting in his chest. Grace fell back onto the couch and began to cry. He picked up one of the pieces of glass, put it in his pocket, and then left the house.

Grace didn't come out to the gate any more after that. The pressure in his chest seemed to increase, and he couldn't knock on her door. He tried twice, but couldn't make himself even walk through the gate. Every day he picked up one piece of every color of broken glass he found, and put it in a plastic Tupperware box. Every night he emptied the pieces from that day into a gallon jar that he set in his west window. When the sun shone through the jar, fragments of colored light wobbled through the room. He smiled and turned his face and hands into the pieces of light in a caress.

When the jar was full, he took it over to Grace's house, the weight in his breast easing the closer he came to the door, until he felt his own heartbeat for the first time since New Year's Eve. He knocked on the door, his hand shaking. A
balding lady answered the door. She had wrinkles on top of her other wrinkles, and spectacles that made her eyes look like the eyes in peacock feathers.

"Where's Grace? How long have you been here?" Russ blurted.

"Who? I've rented this house for a month, son." She looked at his jar with her peacock eyes. "What's that?"

"Here." Russ set the jar down on her step. "Put it in a window where the sun shines." He ran out of the gate and stared at the immaculate cracks in the cement as he walked toward home. They threatened to fill with blood, and he started to run.

*    *    *    *

It was raining on June 10, 1992, but Russ continued to shuffle along in his stained orange mackintoshes, sweeping the dirt and gravel carefully off the cement in front of the apartments on South 108th Street. Bricks periodically fell out of the crumbling mortar, looking like missing teeth in the solid grill of a great blue whale's mouth, and leaving a jumble of coarse and fine red dust in piles where they shattered. Gangs used the pieces to put in pipe bombs that they set off at night.

Six kids rode up around him on their black cobra bicycles, chewing toothpicks or unlit cigarettes. "Yo, old man, gonna move your ass off the sidewalk?" The kid wearing a black denim jacket with a Japanese style tiger
emblazoned on the back stepped off his bike and sauntered toward him. His hands were soft and square, except for his scarred knuckles with the snake tattoos, as they swung out beneath his sleeves. The other kids dismounted and crowded around. Three of them started throwing all the trash in his bin back into the street, at him, and at each other. Russ's head started to feel detached from the rest of his body as he watched and said nothing. "Yo, I asked you a question!" The first kid shoved Russ in the back. "You either do what I say, or answer me when I ask you a question, yo!"

"Talk to me when I ask you questions!" The guards had Russ up against the wall, one pinning each hand and foot, and four others beat him in shifts, switching on the hour. Russ spat out another mouthful of blood, and a third of a tooth twinkled on the floor from within the growing red puddle, looking like it was swimming in his blurred vision. Granny was trying to get near him with bandages, he thought. Herman was chained with his face toward Russ, forced to watch, tears on his cheeks. "Talk!" The guard glared at Herman and struck him with a cudgel to remind him what Russ's pain felt like.

"Okay, man, enough. I'll tell you whatever you want to know, but put him back, man." The guards dragged Russ back to the cell after beating him again for being unable to walk. Herman never came back to the cell. A scared recruit named Barry replaced him. Later he heard a rumor that Herman was killed for
giving false information. Russ pulled out his broken teeth with his fork. The nerve endings were black through the heart to the roots.

Russ's eyes locked to the face of the kid, who was moving to shove him again, and he saw his own hands move without commanding them to. He dropped his broom to clatter on the ground and snatched the kid's wrists, spinning him around to twist them behind his back as Russ's leg swept his ankles out from under him, sending the kid crashing to the ground. Russ hit the back of his head with the heel of his hand six times, bouncing his face against the cement. One of the other kids moved to stop him, and Russ's fist plowed into his jaw, knocking him over. His foot struck another in the stomach.

A big kid with greasy hair stepped forward on the balls of his feet, brandishing a switchblade. The other kids cleared off into a circle, watching. Russ dodged as the kid swung the knife toward him. He picked up his broom again. The kids all laughed, but Russ blocked the next thrust of the knife with the broom handle, then brought it down with a crack on the arm. The kid yelped and rushed at him, but Russ sidestepped and hit his back with the broom handle, causing him to go sprawling. Russ placed his foot between the kid's shoulder blades and stepped on the wrist of the knife hand with the other foot, prying the knife loose from his fingers. Russ slammed the blade against the cement and broke it, then got up and brandished his broom. The teenagers drew back and
jumped back on their bikes. The kid whose face he had hit into the sidewalk struggled to keep up with the others. Russ slowly bent and began to pick up trash.

*   *   *   *   *

Russ sat in the back of a pale green bus, watching the people mill around in front of Starbucks. The acrid fumes of the bus's exhaust twinged the inside of his nose. The bus shook in protest as it jostled across the train tracks that separated downtown from streets of shabby apartments. Russ was sitting alone, looking out the window, his wrinkled skin pulling downward on his face and hands. A breeze from a window open somewhere lifted the wisps of sandy-gray hair from his head.

“Moorland Street!” the driver shouted to his three passengers as he pulled to a stop, his meaty wrist carelessly plunked on top of the shift stick. Russ looked at his reflection--it was a shadow in the dirty glass of the bus window, with the world unrolling behind it. The bus passed the tracks again, and neon lights advertising beer and cigarettes blinked in the windows. Furtive figures slouched into the pawn-shops on the corners.

The remnants of chains on a dented basketball hoop clinked softly as the wind moaned through them. A child of no more than seven with pants drooping down to his knees slouched along the broken cement sidewalk by the road, hands in his pockets. Shouting obscenities at someone across the street, he joined a group of older kids who stared insolently at the bus as it passed.
It was getting dark. His hands trembled as he unwrapped a stick of Wrigley's Spearmint gum and put it in his mouth. He chewed it until it lost its flavor, and then looked at his reflection in the window again. The world outside was fading, and he watched himself become more substantial. His mouth was lopsided from how his lips shrank over the brownish nubs of all his remaining teeth. He frowned.

*   *   *   *

Chewing on gravel always hurt, and his teeth were wearing down more every week. When the guards beat him, he concentrated on jamming his teeth into the gravel or grit in his mouth. Granny's voice seemed to harangue him on those nights as he sat propped up in the corner between the cement and bars with his jaw aching and covered with bruises. [I control it, Granny. My pain is mine. Their pain doesn't reach me if I make some of my own.] He smiled and turned to the wall to sleep.

*   *   *   *

Russ took out his knife from his duffel bag, and using his reflection in the bus window as a guide, cut away the gums around the top of his teeth to pry them all out. He chewed a stick of gum for every tooth he pulled and shoved the wads into leftover holes, which still leaked blood around their plugs. His mouth tingled with the taste of salty metal and mint, and he swallowed and swallowed.
Russ closed his eyes, rolling his extricated teeth around in his hand. He saw guards who were still beating him after all these years, the pieces of his teeth in puddles of blood. He felt the painful grinding of grit that he chewed so he would have control over his own pain. Pulling out of his duffel bag a box with his POW Medal, and Korean Service Medal, he placed the eleven stumps of his teeth on top. The ribbons bled. He closed the box and tossed it all out the window. He heard a faint pop as the cars behind the bus hit the box, and it broke. He smiled, still swallowing blood. [It can't find me, now, Granny. They ran over the war.]

The bus finished its loop and began again. [Life is like a circle, Granny. Sooner or later everything come round again. Funny, isn't it? I’m not stuck here, Granny. I’ll get off next time around.] A fly buzzed crazily at the window, looking for an exit.

END
THE PRICE OF NEW TEETH:
A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
The Price of New Teeth: A Psychological Analysis

In "The Price of New Teeth," Russ Rockweather suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder due to being a prisoner-of-war in Korea. Since he lacked constructive coping strategies or counseling, his story is an account of a ruined life. Russ’s memories of the prison during the war, and his interactions with his world when he returns, are intended to present a vivid picture of some possible outworking of the post-traumatic stress symptoms in a war veteran.

Though this story focuses on war experiences, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is not limited to war. The DSM-IV cites other common triggers such as rape, working in the morgue, and ethnic or political genocide (928). For the problems ensuing from the traumatic incident to qualify as a diagnosable disorder, the DSM-IV presents this qualification of the disorder and what kind of event is defined as traumatic:

“The diagnosis of PTSD is based on a history of exposure to a traumatic stressor, the simultaneous appearance of three different symptom clusters, a minimal duration, and the existence of functional disturbance. To qualify as traumatic, the event must have involved actual or threatened death…or a threat to the individual or others, and exposure to the event must arouse an intense affective response characterized by fear, helplessness, or horror” (926).

The disorder can either be acute, which means lasting at least a month after the overwhelming event, or chronic, which lasts beyond three months. Any symptoms that last less than a month, even if all the categories are met, is not classified as a disorder.
The symptoms that Russ displays are from each of the qualifying areas laid out by the DSM-IV. The things he went through as a prisoner of war constantly left him experiencing or witnessing violence and death, and he was helpless to escape any part of that. Both during the time he spends as a prisoner and in the life that follows his release, Russ begins to show some of the symptoms in the DSM-IV that Judith Herman categorizes into the general categories of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. A quote by Kardiner states that “When a person is overwhelmed by terror and helplessness, the whole apparatus for concerted, coordinated and purposeful activity is smashed” (186), and this is precisely what happens to Russ’s life.

Hyperarousal is a state in which an individual is constantly expecting something that will put him or her in danger. This often leads to an overreactive startle response or irritability, difficulty sleeping, increased heart or breathing rate and blood pressure, and usually is long lasting. Russ displays these characteristics in several ways. When the kids are taunting him and what they say serves as a trigger for one of his horror-filled memories, he reacts violently: “He saw his own hands move without commanding them to... Russ hit the back of [the kid’s] head with the heel of his hand six times, bouncing his face against the cement.” This instinctive startle reflex and reaction with violence to irritation is seen in his brief relationship with Grace, as well. The increased physical arousal of heart and
breathing rate also happens during his panic attack after which he shoves Grace in her house and leaves.

Increased aggression is a common result in people who have been traumatized by war experiences, though it isn’t something that they want to do or see, either. Judith Herman talks about this aspect of war veterans in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*: “Because of their difficulty in modulating intense anger, survivors oscillate between uncontrolled expressions of rage and intolerance of aggression of any form” (56). Although he can’t control his fear and anger when Grace tries to approach him, Russ hates the fact that he shoves her, and recognizes the fact that he is a broken man by picking up the piece of glass from the whiskey bottle he broke. His response to his own reaction is making the jar of broken glass that symbolizes his life after the war, and he hopes that she will understand, forgive, and accept him despite his problems.

The other explicit example of hyperarousal in “The Price of New Teeth” is Russ’s insomnia. His arousal levels increase when night falls, and he is ultra-alert to the presence of imagined danger.

“At night he would lie in bed for hours without sleep… It was the heavy silence that made every muscle in his body tense, and he lay with his eyes open, scrutinizing the shadows for movement, sometimes jumping out of bed to crouch cat-like on the ground when he thought he heard feet gliding through wet grass or saw the flash of the barrels of guns in the dark.”

Sleep disturbance can take the form of difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or having traumatic nightmares. It’s unusual for trauma victims not to display one or
more of the disturbed sleep symptoms at some point during their post traumatic period. Nightmares of the event also fall into the category of Intrusion.

Intrusion is the name of the class of symptoms where the traumatic event is reexperienced by the victim, and may include a constant flow of memories, dreams, reliving the past in flashbacks, hallucinations, etc, and the victim often responds intense reactions to specific cues or triggers in the environment that bear similarity to the event. Of the three categories, this one is the closest to occurring in full consciousness. The victim is aware of the memories most times as they surface, whereas he or she may not always be aware of the presence or causes behind hyperarousal or constriction as such. But the very act of remembering is generally considered to be a conscious process most of the time.

“The Price of New Teeth” as a story is almost made of Russ’s intrusive memories. People, events, words, objects all trigger memories, some of them so intense that he actually relives them. The way the differences between them are distinguished has to do with the presence or absence of the asterisks during the memories. The intense flashbacks are italicized, but incorporated into the scene and the rest of the text, whereas the less traumatic memories are set apart from his present life by asterisks, and don’t prompt the mental and physical responses that the flashbacks do. For instance, the two flashbacks occur when Russ is interacting with Grace on New Year’s Eve and when the thugs on the street confront him. In
both cases he reacts violently to the person in the real world after he relives the traumatic scene, partially because Grace and the thugs become a representation of someone he was interacting with in the past. His reaction to the thugs (beating them up) is an example of suppressed anger toward his captors that he was unable to release during his imprisonment. However, his reaction to Grace shows the defense mechanisms of numbness and isolation that he developed due to the torture of his friends, and the fear of pain in intimate personal connections.

Avoidance of relationships and/or inability to feel emotional in any areas, detachment, depressed activity levels, no sense or planning for the future, and other forms of avoidance of anything associated in some way with the trauma are what construct the category of Constriction. Numbness is a word often used in conjunction with the symptoms in this category, and can be a more or less conscious coping response. The character of Russ is painted as someone who intentionally starts avoiding relationships because of the increase of casualties in the prison when people have warm friendships with one another. The guards use torturing Randy as a method to get Russ to talk, and then later torture Russ to get information from Herman in the same way. In the prison, making friends leads to pain and death, so it is adaptive to cultivate coldness between prisoners. When Russ comes home to find Granny Fisher dead after the war, which was the last relationship he held onto with feelings of warmth, his ability to have real
friendships dies away. The evidence of this is shown in his interactions with Grace, who tries to rub some of her warmth and sympathy off on him, and ends up only getting hurt because his defenses are too deep rooted to allow her to be close to him. His total lack of relationships continues through his whole life, and he’s still sweeping the streets alone when he’s in his 60’s.

I think the most powerful example of the disturbance and avoidance in his life in the constriction category is when he carves his teeth out of his mouth on the bus.

“He’s mouth was lopsided from how his lips shrank over the brownish nubs of all his remaining teeth. He frowned… Russ took out his knife from his duffel bag, and using his reflection in the bus window as a guide, cut away the gums around the top of his teeth to pry them all out. He chewed a stick of gum for every tooth he pulled and shoved the wads into leftover holes, which still leaked blood around their plugs.”

He has put physical pain under his own control, which he finds less hurtful than the psychological agony of the memories of torture, helplessness, horror, and fear. He believes that throwing his teeth out the window, along with his medals of service, will rid him of the painful memories of things connected to the war, since these serve as triggers of memories (his last personal, physical connections to the experience). This, of course, isn’t true at all, because his memories are triggered just as much by situational similarities over which he has no control, but it is a testament of the lengths some people with severe post-traumatic stress will go to in order to reduce their anxiety.
The lack of being able to plan for the future is also shown as a less intense aspect of constriction in Russ’s life. One of Grinker and Spiegel’s observations from studying post traumatic stress in Vietnam Veterans was that “soldiers in wartime responded to the losses and injuries within their group with diminished confidence in their own ability to make plans and take initiative…” (Frye & Stockton, 52). Russ starts cleaning streets just after he gets back from Korea, and “A vast gray fog blanketed his future when he tried to think past the day.” He never does anything else with his life but clean streets until he gets old. He tries to take a bus away from his normal life, but just rides around and around in circles, intending always to get off and get out but never doing it. The fly buzzing crazily, looking for an exit in the last sentence is a picture of what he is doing in trying to leave behind all his connections to his past at that point in his life, without a plan or direction, trapped and detached.

Though there are many other small details inside the story that show very specific aspects of wartime post traumatic stress, all of the most important symptoms that Russ displays are contained and explained within the general areas of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. Without help, many people with post traumatic stress disorder don’t recover completely, and some don’t recover at all. Bringing an understanding of the real issues that interfere with people’s ability to live a fulfilled life will set people on the road to healing.
REFERENCES


