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## The Un-Game

Kathleen Founds

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## The Un-Game

### Abstract

An excerpt from a novel manuscript.

### Keywords

letters, teacher, student, insanity



ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

July 29, 2011

## The Un-Game

by Kathleen Founds

*Excerpt from a novel manuscript*

Dear Ms. Freedman,

We kept asking Mrs. Calderon why you abandoned us after break. She said you had “health issues.” Adam Sandoval says he knocked you up, but don’t worry, barely anyone believes him, especially the part about it being the medical miracle of Siamese twins. I kept bugging Calderon until she ripped a kid’s drawing off the bulletin board and scribbled your address. *Ms. Laura Jane Freedman, Bridges, 400 Pecan Blvd, Austin, TX.* At first I was like, ah, shit, Ms. Freedman’s a druggie! Because a cousin of mine went to a rehab called *Bridges*. On the home page, though, it says, “Guests unwind in the whirlpool, contemplating the exquisite beauty of arid plains.” Which sounds like a super-deluxe get-away spa. Then I used my critical reading skills, like we practiced with the toothpaste ads. I realized: you are in the looney bin.

I feel bad, Ms. Freedman. Plenty of teachers have thrown a terrarium out a

window and shouted, “You’re driving me crazy!” But you’re the first who actually followed through. You were so nice to us, too. You gave us extra credit for wearing costumes on Halloween, and you brought in all that cardboard on Bastille Day so we could make funny hats. I don’t know if you remember, but I made mine look like a pope’s hat. I wore it after school to confirmation class, and even Sister Gloria tried it on.

The substitute we got for the last few months of school is not so nice. El Corporal. He is really into discipline. The first time Adam Sandoval sassed him, El Corporal screamed, “Drop and give me fifty!” We watched while Adam tried. He barely made twenty. We felt bad for him, Ms. Freedman. We pretty much shut up and did our work after that.

While school is not so great, I got promoted at The Rising Dove. Kind of. I am “temporary activities coordinator,” while the real activities coordinator gets a gastric bypass. Instead of wiping butts, I wheel the fogies into a room with moldy encyclopedias and tall windows to read “Dear Abby” and the horoscopes. Last week I taught poetry. “The Haiku is an ancient artform,” I read from an internet printout. “It contains three lines, in a syllable pattern of 5-7-5:

An old silent pond  
A frog jumps into the pond  
Splash! Silence again.”

The old people sat there. Carl started eating a crayon. Finally Joan—who is the rest home at fifty for getting fat and depressed and not taking her meds—scrawled out some lines.

“Joan,” I said. “Want to share?”

She scraped back her chair, and read:

“A swarthy old pirate, McPhee,  
chased after them lasses with glee.  
‘till his wife seized an axe,  
Made one hearty whack,  
and tossed his old jewels out to sea.”

I did the only thing I could do, Ms. Freedman.

I led them in a round of applause.

After ten minutes of poetry failure, the walking fogies up and left, and the cripples asked to be wheeled back to their rooms. I looked at the blank papers and broken crayons. So much for my plan of including old people poetry in *El Giraffe*, the Joseph P. Anderson High School Lit Mag. I thought it could add variety. Being the student advisor, Ms. Freedman, you know we get mostly suicide poems. I thought old people might write on different themes, such as tarnished lockets with pictures of dead babies, or gout. I am hoping to God El Corporal does not replace you as *Giraffe* advisor. I have such weak-ass arms, Ms. Freedman, I can only do like two push-ups, so he'll probably fire me as editor and choose someone in JROTC, like Julie Chang.

Anyways, I have still been writing poetry a lot, even though you're not here. I included a poem I just finished. It is called *Eclipse*. I thought maybe if you felt like it you could read it.

Your friend,

*Janice*



ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

## The Un-Game

Dear Janice,

Thank you for sending me your poem, *Eclipse*. I was impressed. Your journaling exercises were always strong, but this poem demonstrates a clarity and awareness that is new and exciting. I especially liked the lines, “Does the darkness hide/ the verses written in your eyes/ the spots upon your soul?” And I was impressed with the narrative turn at the end of the poem. “I walked with you for a while/ But soon I found that I / prefer to walk in the light.” And nice use of enjambment! You do remember the term? Come to think of it, I’m not sure we made it to enjambment. I think our last literary term was simile. There were no similes in your poem.

You will have to forgive me, Janice. My memory is a bit shaky these days. It’s not professional of me to go into this, I know, but I feel I owe you an explanation. In short: there are some pills I take to balance my brain chemistry. In November, I flushed them down the toilet. I had an initial rush of energy—I imagine you recall the lit-term jeopardy board coated with industrial-grade glitter glue (I’ve been told El Corporal burned it in the gravel pit). Soon, though, I felt a strong need to curl in the fetal position in a dark, enclosed, space. Towards the end, I hallucinated that a great bird appeared at my window and wrapped me in its downy wings.

My brother tracked me down to Phoenix, Arizona, where I'd been sitting on a park bench, feeding hamburgers to birds. He brought me back to Austin and checked me into *Bridges*. The doctors have gotten my medication straightened out, but I still wake up each morning feeling exsanguinated (look it up).

I want you to know Janice, that though I had a hard time managing the classroom as a whole, I do care deeply for each of you. It means a great deal that you've taken the time to write. Your nursing home story made me smile. To the orderlies at *Bridges*, I must seem like one of your intractable charges—I refused to attend clay modeling class three times this week. Do keep sending me poetry. I have a lot of time on my hands, here, and I'd rather spend it reading your work than filling out my mood chart.

Fondly,

*Ms. F*

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Dear Ms. Freedman,

I'm glad they got you on the right pills. I looked up exsanguinated and it means, "drained of blood and life." I feel that way a lot of times when I get home from work. Maybe I need some mental meds and a week at *Bridges*, ha ha.

In order to waste time at the rest home on Thursday, I inventoried the supply closet. As I counted crates of tangled string and stacks of brittle magazines, I realized: the "supplies" are just things geezers leave behind when they die. Then I saw the "Un-Game," battered in the corner. I thought: damn, a real supply. An activity for tomorrow!

Me and the Un-Game, we go way back. I first played it at Amelia Basil's house. Amelia's parents believed in exact fairness. They liked the Un-Game, because no one wins. You just take turns pulling question cards like "Who do you trust?" and "What is your favorite: triangle or dodecahedron?" While I played the game on Amelia's rug, shoveling Cheez-its in my face, I learned that Mrs. Basil's happiest moment was eating jumbo shrimp dipped in cocktail sauce a week before her wedding.

This seemed sad to me.



Today I wheeled old folks onto the sun porch to play the Un-Game. Aurora leaned down to pick up the lid of the game-box. Her eyes wobbled. She put the box on top of her head.

"It's to shade myself," she said.

"Do you want me to get you a hat from your room?"

She held it there, arm shaking. "I have no hat."

"Okay," I said, feeling bad she had Parkinson's, plus also a box on her head. "You can go first." I flipped through the deck, discarding downers (*Share a big let-down in your life. What do you think it's like after you die?*)

"Okay, Aurora. I found a question for you!"

It was hard to watch Aurora's emaciated body tremble. It was like watching a grandma be crucified.

*"What is your most sentimental possession?"*

"My Bible."

"A classic! What's your favorite story?"

"The cripple at the well."

"I like it when Jesus overturns the tables in the temple and drives out money-changers with a whip of braided cords."

I turned to Helen, whose body swelled out of her wheelchair like a rising mound of dough. "Helen. *'What advice would you give a young man about to get married?'*"

"Buy her . . . flowers," Helen croaked, trying to adjust her thick, terminator-style shades.

"That's sweet. Did your husband buy you flowers?"

“My lover . . . did.”

I imagined a lover climbing Helen’s mountain of flesh, planting a flag in her perm. “Good for you, Helen. Way to live fully.” I turned to Nancy, a frail woman with puffy orange hair. “*What are you most proud of?*”

Nancy brushed an imaginary crumb from her arm.

“Like, what have you done in your life that you feel good about?”

She rubbed her eyes.

“Nancy. C’mon. Participate.”

“I’m not proud of anything,” she sobbed. Tears streamed down her face.

So much for the un-game.

Before I worked here, I thought living a long time would automatically make you kindly and wise. Not so much. The old people cheat at bingo and throw hissy fits about toast. Anyways, I’m going to see if I can steal some beer from my aunt, and get wasted, and forget about my day. Don’t tell.

Your friend,

*Janice*

P.S. This is a kind of weird poem I wrote on my break today. It is called, *Nicoli, Who Was Thrown To the Wolves Behind the Sleigh, 1845.*

Dear Janice,

I suppose I don’t have to tell you that your prefrontal cortex is not fully formed until the age of twenty five. Abusing alcohol in the teen years may cause your brain to re-circuit, wiring you for dependence on alcohol or other substances.

But I understand why you’d want to drink. Sometimes the mind whirs and pinwheels, rising and contracting on roller coaster stairs, and you need a

little something to blur the flashing lights to shade forests of tree green.

At least postpone your drinking until you make it to college. Please. Alcohol could be your camel's straw—the weight that tips you into the world of perpetual rest home employment. Try that for purgatory.

Sorry I'm jangly. They've augmented meds, seeking that which won't exsanguinate. This new cocktail (of drugs) makes me feel I've swallowed batteries. Energizing yet artificial. I do not recommend.

Naptime!

*Ms. F*

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## The Un-Game

Dear Janice,

I haven't heard from you in a while, and I worry my last letter offended you. If so: apologies. It's hard for me to tell, sometimes, when I should staple back my tongue. Your choices are your own. God knows my adolescence wasn't the picture of propriety. (And look how well I turned out. Ha!)

As for your poem. What a strange, lovely opening. "You used to pet the/soft fur that grew on the tips/ of my ears. Pleasure in the seat of my belly/ as you held me, mother." I wonder if you might consider adding one more verse. As it is, it's a bit difficult to tell exactly what happens after the mother wanders into the snow. Overall though, fine work.

Best,

*Ms. F*

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## The Un-Game

Dear Ms. Freedman,

Sorry I didn't write. It's just I found out the Smucker's plant is closing down. My dad is being transferred to Piggot, Kentucky, which just happens to be where his jam factory girlfriend (Glenda) was transferred six months ago. According to the brochures, Piggot is famous for hand-carved canoes and Kentucky's only life-size wax museum. I HATE WAX FIGURES! I screamed, throwing a light fixture at my dad. THEY ALWAYS COME TO LIFE AND TRY TO KILL YOU! According to him, that's not the point. According to him, he can't get another job here, unless he works the fields, and his back can't take that. The worst part is, he wants me to stay here, and live with my fat aunt. He says it's because I'm already in school here, but I know it's because Glenda doesn't want me living with them. So now I get to share a room with my cousin Macy, who is always saying things like, "Planning on growing boobs this year, Janice?" Plus, she is pregnant, so I am also going to be sharing my room with a screaming baby. God. I hate my life. Maybe I could come be your roommate at *Bridges*. Ha. Ha ha ha ha. Seriously, though, I'd rather live pretty much anywhere than with my aunt.

Cross My Heart & Hope to Die,

Janice

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## The Un-Game

Dear Friend of [Laura Freedman](#),

This letter is to inform you that, due to the complexity of this therapeutic juncture, *Bridges Psychiatric Wellness Solutions*<sup>TM</sup> has deemed it best to isolate our client from outside stimuli. All mail for Laura Freedman will be returned to sender until further notice. Thank you for your concern.

Spirit Engaged,

*Andrew Schaffer, Outreach Coordinator*

From: [janthepiratespy@hotmail.com](mailto:janthepiratespy@hotmail.com)

To: [lfreedman@anderson.edu](mailto:lfreedman@anderson.edu)

Subject: !?!

Dear Ms. Freedman,

I am e-mailing you because maybe you will get a chance to sneak away from a nurse and look at your e-mail. They are not giving you my letters because you are apparently on lockdown. God, what did you do, assault an

orderly? Jesus. I looked at the *Bridges* website again and I have to say the place creeps me out. First of all, who signs *anything* “Spirit Engaged”? Second, the section on electro-shock therapy says “To ameliorate the stress of temporary memory loss, *Bridges* staff eliminates potentially stressful stimuli.” Which I am thinking means you are getting electro-shock therapy. God. I didn’t think they even did that anymore. Does your hair stick out crazy all over the place? I hope you’re okay. I really hope you’re okay.

Your Friend,

*Janice*

From: janthepiratespy@hotmail.com

To: Ifreedman@anderson.edu

Subject: RE: !?!

Dear Ms. Freedman,

I guess they are not letting you check your e-mail. Who knows, maybe they don’t even have computers there. Maybe it’s “excessive stimuli.” Ha ha. Well guess who is teaching our English class this year? El Corporal. Yes. Mrs. Hinojosa liked the way he licked us into shape, so she hired him full-time. We are learning lots of literature under this totalitarian regime, if learning lots of literature means filling out worksheets while El Corporal paces the room, bristling. I have to admit, though, it’s kind of cool to see him shut down the cocky kids like Juan and Adam. Even Juan looked nervous when El Corporal made him stay during lunch hour for a “conversation.” I was lounging on the grass, drawing a yeti on my jeans, when Juan stumbled out of the classroom. He looked like he’d been through a wind tunnel.

“Did he get you with the bullwhip, Juan?”

“He made me clean out the hamster cages.”

“What does that have to do with you throwing a stapler at Timon?”



“He accused me of ‘inciting irresponsible reproductive activity among rodents.’”

“You put Kojax in Tulip’s cage?”

“I wouldn’t have done it if I knew that bitch would eat her babies.”

“Dude, you deserved what you got.”

Juan looked me over. “Janice. Way to get boobs this summer.”

I flipped him the bird. I was about to let that punctuate our conversation, but then I thought, hey. You know what would serve my dad right? If he heard I was hanging around with losers, such as Juan, who has been in my class since kinder. Back then he had a head like a T-Rex, and he brought his toys crashing down on my head without reason. My dad hated him.

“What are you doing right now?”

“Ditching PE and taking you to the lake?”

“The last time I hung out with you, Juan, you cut the hair off all my troll dolls.”

“Aw, Janice, come on. You’re too old to play with dolls, anyway.”

So I went to the lake with Juan. On the way we stopped and got slurpees and when we got to the lake we poured rum in them and they were cold and good as we sat on the hood of his car. When you get to know Juan, it’s surprising. Beneath the cocky asshole exterior, there is a sticky marshmallow interior. We reminisced about old times, like when Adam Sandoval choked on a golf ball in second grade and the janitor saved him. Juan told me that his dad had always wanted him to be a doctor. He worked double shifts at the Discount Mattress Outlet to save for Juan’s college, until the night he had a heart attack while stacking kings. They found him the next morning, hands over his heart. Dead.

“You should be a doctor, though, J. You were always smart and stuff. You could be one of those pretty doctors like on TV.”

“Not if I keep failing.”

“You do good in school.”

“Um, El Corporal’s PE class?”

“Smart people suck at sports. It’s like, one of those inverse scenarios.”

“Wow. It’s like you were almost paying attention in math.”

“You probably just suck at push-ups because you have brains in your arms instead of muscles.” Juan drew a diagram in the mud with a stick. “Actually, your boobs are probably all filled with brains, too,” he said, adding two wiggly lumps to his diagram.

“If I have brains in my arms, how am I about to punch in your face?”

“You’re the doctor.” Juan flicked the stick into the lake. “Don’t ask me.”

Don’t worry, Ms. Freedman. I’m not stupid enough to get knocked up like Christina Sackburn-Reyes. I just want to hang out with dino-head enough to freak out my dad.

Xo

*Janice*

*Kathleen Founds has a BA from Stanford and an MFA from Syracuse. She has worked as a drop-out prevention counselor at a South Texas middle school, organized an after-school program (“The Inner Beauty Parlor”) for teen girls in inner-city Syracuse, and taught English and Creative Writing at a technical school in the Ohio cornfields. “The Un-Game” is a chapter from her novel-in-stories, When Mystical Creatures Attack!*

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