

CONTEMPORARY YA PROSE WRITING SAMPLE

Not My First Mistake

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You hate bleeding until you stop doing it. Then it's all you can think about, and you check the lining of your underwear, and every time you pee, you look at the toilet paper, and you think, *is it just a little bit pink?*

Sorry, is that TMI? Whatever, it's going to get worse. Like, way worse.

The test languished for I-don't-know-how-long at the bottom of my backpack as I hoped finally, *finally* getting my period would render it unnecessary. I thought of red things to make it come, I focused on the brilliant autumn leaves outside my bedroom window, and I wrote poems of red things. Hearts and viscera, nebulas and lava, berries and flowers and my dead mother's hair. I cradled my notebook in my lap, like a grimoire, and wrote *red red red* over and over, like maybe I could conjure it, like maybe I had any power in this world.

Padding quietly across the white carpeting, I flipped on the bathroom light and plunged myself into its warm, orange glow. Nothing about this house had been updated since the '90s when my parents first moved in, and there was this awful, orange and brown wallpaper in the

mirror behind my head. I couldn't even really look at myself, mostly because I wondered how I could possibly be so fucking stupid. Like, there might not be great sex education in this country, but I wasn't a moron. I knew what a condom was. Stupid, Cade. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

My first mistake was buying pregnancy tests in bulk. Ok, so that was definitely not my *first mistake*, but it's an *expression*, ok? The thing was, I rushed through the whole process so when I was in Walmart, I snagged literally the first test box I saw and used the self-check-out, and when I got home, I looked at it and noticed that Choice Rite brand comes in cases of twelve. I mean, I only spent ten bucks on it, so that was a steal.

Please read instructions carefully before beginning the test. Ok. My second mistake was that I'd gotten a test that necessitated *peeing into a cup*, so I used one of my dad's coffee mugs. Sorry, Dad. It was the one that had three lines printed on it at various coffee levels: "Shhh", "Almost", and "Ok, now you may speak." I filled it halfway to Almost.

Holding the mug straight up to my lady bits, I wondered how people don't get piss all over their hands when they do this. And then I wondered if they do, and if it's probably just another one of those things that no one ever talks about. Life would be so much less lonely if we talked about stuff like this. I set the stick in the cup, set the cup on the countertop and washed my hands, trying not to stare at it, because it takes three minutes.

Except that no, it doesn't. I guess sometimes when you're obviously super pregnant, the little blue plus sign shows up right away, and you don't have to wait at all to know that you're an idiot who has totally ruined her life. I looked down at it like it was a piece of glowing radium and, in a fit of denial, stuck a second test into the cup of pee, and then a third. They all told me the same thing, and I felt all the poetry I'd been trying to write thicken into a knot in my throat.

That's the most important thing you need to know about me. Not that I'm an idiot who got herself knocked up, not that my mom died last year, but that I'm a poet. Or, I wanted to be a poet, but as I sank down to the bathroom floor, I felt that future evaporating in front of my eyes. I thought I would cry. I wanted to cry. I didn't.

Instead, I stared at the loose hairs, dust, and bits of human detritus that was all tucked up under the cabinet beneath the sink and I saw the tiny crescent moon of a stray nail clipping and I thought: *that's how big it is right now.*

I curled up around it, in spite of myself and tried to imagine all possible futures: what if I kept it? Well, ok, let's think this through. I'd be pregnant for basically all of senior year, count it out: October to November... I'd give birth in Late July, early August. I'd only have a few weeks before I would have to go to college, but who am I kidding? I'd have to get a job and forget about college. Forget about poetry.

And that's *if* my dad even let us stay under his roof the entire time. God. I would have to tell my Dad. My dad was a pretty devout Catholic, having grown up with an Irish father and an Italian mother, it was sort of bound to happen. From him, I'd inherited blue eyes and a bad temper, but little else. I did not share his faith. I mean. Obviously.

I wonder if he'd even let me stay. Would he kick me out? Would he disown me? Would he even acknowledge this kid? I couldn't see this future. I couldn't see my belly growing round as a sail full of wind, I couldn't see myself abandoning the future I'd planned for myself. It wasn't like I never wanted to be a mother. I did. I think I did. I mean, I might. God, who knows these things when they're seventeen? I just didn't want to do it now. First: graduation, college, poetry. Then: everything else.

So I thought of the other possible future. I thought of what it might be like to go to a clinic and to have them evacuate my uterus. I wondered if that made me a murderer, the way my father's church said it did. And some smaller, quieter part wondered if it made me an angel of mercy. I rolled onto my side, let the tile of the bathroom floor cool my flushed cheek, my fevered forehead. Panic had immobilized me, and I vaguely entertained the notion of throwing myself down a flight of stairs, but I shook that darkness out of my head, and sat up.

No. I smacked my forehead with the heel of my hand over and over, a self-remonstration that was harsher than anything anyone else could have given me. Maybe everyone was right: I was a selfish, stupid whore who deserved to suffer.

No.

No.

I thought, simply, no. I was made of no. I embodied the very concept of *no*. And just like that, I knew what I had to do.

I pulled myself up off the bathroom floor, plucked the 3 tests out of my cup of piss, and shoved them back into the box with their 9 unsullied compatriots to be disposed of off-site. Then, I pulled my laptop onto my bed and laid on my belly, letting the glow of the screen be the only light in the room. And I googled "Abortion Clinics Michigan".

The first thing that came up was for the Women's Center of Michigan, which had a photo of three girls of a variety of ethnicities, smiling with their arms slung around each other. Underneath it was a coupon that said, in pink letters, "Special Online Discount: Show this coupon for \$20 off your first visit", and I had to laugh. It was a short, sharp bark, but it was a

laugh all the same. I took a screenshot of the photo. I'd save twenty bucks.

I read: *Women's Center of Michigan has multiple locations to serve Michigan. Our Abortion Clinics are owned and operated by a Board Certified OB/GYN with over 32 years of experience.* Ok, ok, that sounded good. It went on to add: *Even if you do not elect to use our services, please ensure that any clinic you visit is run by a board-certified OBGYN and not by a non-professional.*

Right. Wouldn't want to end up in one'a them tricky "crisis pregnancy centers" where they just give you an ultrasound and send you on your way with pamphlets about Jesus and adoption.

Adoption. I rolled over onto my back and stared at the ceiling. When I was little, my mom had helped me put up glow in the dark stars on the ceiling. Many of them had fallen off, but some were still there, my own, personal constellations. I knew their positions in my tiny sky better than I knew the lines of my own face.

I was eight or so, and she stood on the bed and gripped me under the arms and raised me high over her head so that I could press the adhesive to the ceiling in the random, haphazard pattern of my choosing. My armpits started to ache from how she held me, but I didn't say anything. I liked being so close to my mom. I remember she smelled like soap and perfume and something else, something earthy, like root vegetables or wet soil. She was beautiful. But isn't that always how we talk about dead women? With a solemn reverence? She was a person, and if she were here now, she'd be mad as hell at me.

My mother had been adopted — I wondered if that meant that's what she would

encourage me to do in my situation. She'd never met her birth mother, though not for want of trying on her birth mother's part. *Dear Lily*, those letters that came every year or two, *I thought I'd try again*, and my heart ached for this person, this stranger, who loved across space and time and was met with only silence.

I thought about the collection of cells that had formed in me and I thought of it, amorphous, amoebic, trying to contact me in twenty years, and the very notion sent a shiver down my spine.

No judgment if that's your thing, it's just not mine. No, my thing was deeply disappointing my Catholic father and shaming the memory of my dead mother. That, apparently, was my thing.

I grabbed my cell phone from my bedside table, and called the clinic, hoping to catch them in the final minutes before they closed up shop for the day. I expected to get an automated recording the way you do when you call almost any other medical office, but an actual, real-life person picked up on the first ring.

"Women's Center of Michigan, this is Rose, how may I help you?" Rose's voice was sweet and unassuming. She almost sounded like she was my age. But no, that couldn't be.

"Um," I began, off to a strong start. "I think I need to, like... not be pregnant." Ah yes, the eloquence for which I would one day come to be known.

"Have you ever visited us before?" She asked, and I could hear her fingers clacking away on a keyboard.

“No.”

“All right, well then let me just get a file started for you, ok?”

“Ok.” My heart clamored quick as computer keys.

“What’s your name?”

“Cade. Uh, Cade Anne Schaefer.” Why were my hands so sweaty?”

“Kate?”

“No, uh. Cade? C-A-D-E. It means... stout. Sturdy. It’s --”

“Sorry about that. Cade. Date of birth?”

“January 17, 2003.”

There was a lull, and I could hear a buzz of static on the phone. I heard Rose exhale, and tried to picture her face: maybe someone petite with blond hair who, when she sighed, inclined her head a little to one side. “So, Cade,” she said, and I didn’t hear her typing anymore. “You’re going to need parental consent in order to have any abortive procedures done.”

How had I not known that? “Why?” I asked. “Isn’t abortion, like, legally protected?”

“It is,” she gently confirmed, “but the rules about it vary from state to state. Michigan requires parental consent for minors.”

“Ok, so, what: like a permission slip?”

“A legal guardian will have to accompany you and sign a consent form on the day of the

procedure.”

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuck.

“Ok,” I said.

“Is that going to be a problem for you?”

Yes. “Um. I’m not sure.”

“Well, do you want to make an appointment anyway? And then we can see how things go when you arrive?”

Why waste your time and mine? There were no circumstances under which my dad was going to give his consent. Not any time this century.

“I’ll just call back,” I said, and hung up before Rose could say anything else, and I guess that made me kind of a jerk, but I thought for a moment that my tears would come, then. It seemed like an appropriate time to cry. But I didn’t.

I scrolled through my recent calls and deleted that one, then made sure to clear my browser history after I navigated away from their website. Deleted my digital coupon, made extra sure to perma-delete it, pluck it out of the cloud like it had never been there. Cleaning up my electronic tracks, as it were.

I flopped back onto my bed and draped my arm across my eyes, blotting out the remaining sunlight as it waned with the onset of evening. I thought of things that might make the

blood come: pictured an empty womb, pictured the thick, clotted clumps of a heavy flow day, pictured myself doubled over with cramps and welcoming them. But I knew I couldn't Manifest Destiny my way out of this. I snapped a photo of the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling, slapped a filter on that shit, and uploaded it to Instagram. Hashtag autumnal melancholy.

I kept scrolling, a habit, a compulsion, a way to get myself out of my own brain, and stopped when I saw a photo of myself on someone else's stream. It was the official Instagram for the Backroom Coffee Shop and they had posted their weekly call for poets to come out for Backroom Brawl, one of several weekly open mics. The image was from a few weeks back, when I was up at the mic, spittin' some raw shit, my mouth open wide, my eyes gleaming in the focused lights. I looked... good, honestly. I looked like there was a fire inside me, like the poetry stoked the flames. So, I made the decision to get up and go, use the evening for inspiration, for escape, for *whatever*. Sometimes the only thing to do is to write your way out.

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The smell of sweat and burnt coffee permeated the air as the sound of applause swelled to welcome Toasty to the stage.

Toasty is the fuckin' *bomb*, and he basically *is* the Poetry that comes out of Ferndale's Back Room, a shitty little hole-in-the-wall coffee shop with a backroom storage space that they've converted into a stage. Shitty bands play there, shitty singer-songwriters try out new music, and shitty poets spit poetry, every Thursday like clockwork. Shitty poets like me.

"All right, all right, *all right*," Toasty said into the mic, using one of his dreads to tie back the rest. "Welcome to Fresh Sauce at Backroom Brawl, the one night a month where we hear

only New Shit.”

New Shit, shouted the crowd, because that’s what we did whenever anyone said the phrase “new shit”. Call and response, from a roiling wave where we were all one poet, all one body. I clutched a piece of lined paper in my sweaty palm and felt like it already belonged to this collective.

Toasty was a bright white smile in a spotlight, the mouth of the body. “We got a fat lineup tonight, y’all. Thirty folks spittin’ brand new shit, like bold shit, like hot shit, but maybe hopefully not shit.”

Laughter, from me, from all of us. I stood shoulder to shoulder in a room full of people, poets, an electric energy making the room buzz with static and sound. I loved Backroom Brawl. I loved disappearing into a crowd, and then emerging, for a few minutes, to shine in a spotlight. When my mom died, Backroom Brawl was my lifeline, which was precisely what I needed in this new moment of total peril. And tonight? I’d be first up at the mic.

“What up, Kid Cade?” Toasty had asked when he saw me come into the room, my backpack slung over my shoulder. I felt a little lighter, having just taken the liberty of throwing away 9 perfectly good pregnancy tests. And three used ones. I took his hand and he drew me in, smacking his hand against my shoulder blade while I did the same to him.

“Can I go early tonight?” I asked as soon as we separated. “I, um, have a lot going on right now? So…”

“Sure thing, Kid,” He said, producing the signup sheet and scribbling my name at the top. “You found your piece for regionals yet?”

I shook my head. Toasty had been bugging me to get my act together for weeks, but I wasn't even sure that I wanted to compete. If I competed, that could mean, like, *attention*. If I even won, which I probably wouldn't. I'd be lucky if I even placed. "I dunno," I grumbled, scratching absently at the skin on the back of my neck. "My stuff isn't really anything."

"Man, shut the hell up," he said, shoving me gently and peering down his nose at me. "You, Kid Cade, are my own personal protegee. You think I do that for just anybody?"

I bloomed in the glow of his compliment. Toasty is the real deal, the kind of poet who made me feel like I was a kid with a crayon. He was a professor of poetry at the University of Michigan, and he still drove down from Ann Arbor every week to host Backroom Brawl. He'd also been bugging me to apply to U of M, be in one of his classes, make the mentorship official. But I'd told him in no uncertain terms that I intended to get the hell out of the Midwest or die trying.

"You gonna perform anything tonight?" I asked, thinking I'd stick around if he did. The other poets could be hit or miss -- there were a few other locals who had something, and every once in a while, we'd get a newcomer with a good idea, but there was also a lot of crap. Which isn't to discount crap: you can learn a lot from crap.

"Not tonight," he said. "I picked up another class this term, and I'm way behind on my lesson planning. They want me to do, like, a history of poetry course, which... Like, ok, fine. But I've been going back and forth with the administration about what should be on the syllabus. Guess who they got me teaching?"

"Dead white men?"

“Dead motherfuckin’ *white men*.” We smiled at one another and I considered -- as I always did whenever I spent more than a few moments in his presence -- if maybe I was being too hasty, refusing to apply to U of M. With a teacher like him, it might be worth it. But then I’d have to call him Professor Davis, instead of Toasty? And that’d just be *weird*. He squeezed my shoulder and jumped up onto the stage to get the evening started, and before I knew it, I was hearing my name.

“Yo, to kick us off, we got us a regular trying to suss out what she’s gonna spit at regionals which, if you don’t know, are taking place at U of M in only a few weeks. Yeah, uh -- more info is tacked to that overflowing cork board in the hall, so check it out. Winner of regionals goes on to compete at Nationals, being held in Washington D.C. in November, and winner of Nationals gets, I dunno, some big fat check or some shit, but nobody from Backroom Brawl ever got that far.” Toasty looked at me then, one corner of his mouth hooked up in a grin. “Yet.”

I swallowed hard, I looked away.

“All right, give it up for my friend, Kid Cade Schaefer!” There was some polite applause, maybe a few yelps from regulars who’d seen me before, maybe even a few of my Instagram subscribers. But mostly, after I climbed up onto that stage, I was looking at a sea of unfamiliar eyes. I took in a deep breath, and exhaled it out again.

“Hey,” I said into the mic, and the room filled with the sound of my voice. “Um, like Toasty said, I’m Cade Schaefer, and I spit a lotta shit up here, but I’m feeling like a newbie on the mic tonight, cuz this is some raw shit.”

Raw shit! The crowd shouted back.

“Um, yeah, so be gentle. Oh and if you wanna follow me, you can find me on Instagram at KidCade. Ok. Here goes.”

When I perform a poem, I kind of black out. I go somewhere else, I go somewhere I can nail the cadence, the lyrical flow where poetry and music collide, somewhere that isn't verse, that isn't rap, somewhere else, somewhere mine. I find my own rhythm, my own style, my voice a beacon and the single body of the audience is drawn in and I feel...

I feel...

Ok.

Or if not ok, at least like things might be eventually.

Better than ok.

Good. I feel good. I feel great. I feel on fire, a good kind of fire, fire like a combustion engine, not like self-immolation.

And all my heavy shit is gone, and for a moment, that little pink plus sign isn't waiting for me.

That little crescent-moon of cells isn't waiting for me.

My dead Ma isn't waiting for me.

I'm free.

I feel myself rise up, and I catch a glimpse of my best self, somewhere above the clouds,

somewhere close to the creature that made me, and I become

I don't know what

Something else

Something beautiful, really beautiful

Not beautiful the way a boy wants beautiful, but really really really --

And then it's over.

As I settled back into myself, I let the sound of the applause wash over me. Someone whistled, even, and I searched the room until my eyes landed on Toasty. I never knew if I did it right until I looked at Toasty, and when I looked at him then, he was cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting "YEEEEEEAH!" And I thought maybe I did good.

"Did I do good?" I asked him, after he called the next poet to the stage, someone neither of us have seen before whose poetry is a series of sharp staccatos.

"You did real good," he assured me, and I smiled up at him. "Was that about your Mom?" And I nodded, because of course it was. Everything I write these days is about my mom in one way or another. Maybe she's why my poetry got so good. What a lousy tradeoff. Toasty gripped me by the shoulders, but he didn't say anything like *oh I'm so sorry* or *how are you holding up?* He was just a sturdy presence, a lifeline back to the world that mattered most to me.

"You should do that one for the regional qualifiers," He said, even as the audience applauded the other poet off the stage and he began to move away from me.

“I dunno...” I said again.

“I do,” Toasty insisted. “I’ll see you back here next week.”

I didn’t stay to watch any of the other poetry. I usually did -- I liked to see what other people were up to, liked to be inspired by fellow artists at work. But that night, I had something else on my mind. I had people I needed to talk to, souls I had to search, words that were aching to get down on paper. When my cell phone died midway through the bus ride home, I kept repeating a few lines of a new poem, the one I would write as soon as I got my grubby little fingers on a pen. It went like this:

What legacy have you left me / except a stutter for a surname? / balanced with a foot on / either side of the hiccup in my ancestry / her hands, those hands, my mother’s hands / have made an alphabet of gestures / and I shall make a poem of her yet.