

Richard Leise, a graduate student majoring in English Education, received an award in the category of Creative Nonfiction for “**The Uniform of Relative Darkness**,” written in ENG 502 for Distinguished Teaching Professor Mary Lynch Kennedy.

The Uniform of Relative Darkness

Richard Leise

“You just don’t want to step on her tits.”
What was that?

Well, whatever that means, he (my boss Frank) just said it, and now Frank hands me the last of a dozen red and white poinsettias that Frank has just finished wrapping in gold foil, and believe me I am correct in thinking there is no point in asking Frank for a second time what he means, because Frank never stops talking long enough for him to hear anything that I say anyways. I, am, simply, an, employee.

As it goes, this woman, this Mrs. Kerre – the woman whose chest I should avoid walking on – is a real bitcher.

From a line of bitchers.

A long line.

“But she’s a paying customer,” Frank reminds me now with a direct look, his old-man Swedish features (of the Seven, he looks like the Dwarf with the round, John Lennon glasses) locking into a face as the stern as the sentence, *Now I know that you’re relatively incompetent, so don’t mess up the plants – this unrelatively simple task – in the time it takes to leave here and get them to her house*, “and she’s having some damn party later on tonight...”

So go ahead and start your truck.

In actuality, this truck that Frank refers to is really a van. A huge, cyanosis blue whale of a van, with no seats except the one for the driver and the one for a passenger. A special order with black, water resistant flooring and De Munn’s Florists painted in yellow Abadi MT Condensed Light on both side windows and for some reason padlocked in the back so that when driving around I feel like people feel like I’m hiding a body inside.

And of course the van isn’t mine – it’s Franks.

But whatever.

I nod as though Frank has just handed me a newborn and I walk slowly towards the back door.

The poinsettia is nice; not one of the rattier ones that I bring to people who live in the trailer parks and who occupy the dizzy, rotting homes that dot the faces of the surrounding hills like hematomas. Full and round like the others, this guy is; red jagged leaves etched with dark blue veins and rimmed green black. Thick stalk; much more red or crimson than brown or even green. Probably goes for about twenty dollars. Twice as much as you’d pay at Stop-n-Save, but, then again, you get twice as much plant. Or so I hear. It’s apparent that he’s healthy – not pithy in any way at all – and he smells as warm as a worm on a wet summer sidewalk. If all twelve or so of Mrs. Tits’ poinsettias are as

fine as this one, she'll have some nice blooming flowers on the table at her dinner party. With my free hand, the hand not cradling the poinsettia, I twist open the door and back my way into the cold.

If I've got a pet peeve it's someone just standing around.

That sentiment, and, You're not gonna want to wear those sandals, is just about the only thing I can remember Frank saying the afternoon he hired me, and he's on the phone now and I need his okay before I can go, so I grab the broom from its spot on the wall and I take a pass over the floor. It's still pretty early in the morning so there's not much to sweep. Plus, my hands are still pretty cold from being outside, and it's hard for me to hold on to the handle with the strength necessary to sweep things along the floor. So I more or less just look at it. The floor.

The floor out back where the men work (and by men I mean Frank and his son Tom) is fashioned out of some kind of strange rubber-like material and is as green as a tennis court. Now why exactly it's green I have no clue, but I have come to find that its texture is designed to prevent slippage and the like. Water spills from the vases or from the girls walking through with the watering can and when it's wet outside you track in all kinds of shit. Or so I'm told. I was surprised though when I found out how easy it is to sweep. You would think that wet leaves and petals would stick to a floor that grips a sneaker like a son of a bitch. Think again.

Frank is still on the phone when Tom pushes air on his way down the steps and into the back room. The look on his narrow rat face is about the same as usual: tight and pensive with self-conscious concern, as though he was the C.E.O. of Disney instead of what he really is: the callous-thumbed rose-arranging son of a small business owner who counts the days until dad retires thus catapulting him to the status of small business owner (entrepreneur!) overnight and freeing the monkey that is being thirty-five without a college education and working for your father in a small flower shop. Even the way he walks – today his steps are quick and his shoulders pump up and down like a runway model with a broken high heel – is an exercise for the day that he will eventually run the place. I realize that sweeping a floor that doesn't really need sweeping will not cut it for him. He won't say anything now – this is not his style – but two weeks from today something will go wrong and he'll get pissed and he'll say something like:

It's just like that time my father was on the phone and you were just standing there with your broom in your hand. (And of course by broom he means dick)

But you and your father were both there, I say, I wasn't trying to duck out of anything; I was just waiting on his okay to go out: if you want me to do something, you should just say so.

But I shouldn't have to.

But Tom, I say, I only get paid \$4.00 an hour. And that's not to say that I'm not fine with that, because I am. That's one of the reasons I like working for small businesses. Don't get paid much, but, then again, I'm not expected to do much. I show up on time – early even. I am polite to your customers. When it was warm out, over the summer, I dug a fucking ditch in your side yard. I'm reliable. What are you talking about? I think you get your \$4.00 out of me every hour.

But for now he just brushes past and out the back door, most likely to the greenhouse to make up some dish gardens and wait for Rush to come on the radio. Tom

has several pet peeves. With names like: Me, Mom, Tuesday, Talking To Anyone But Dad, Fat People. Me is probably his favorite though. He likes to take Me for long walks only when it is convenient for him and then he beats the piss out of Me with a newspaper after Me pisses on the living room floor only because he was too lazy to get up from his chair to let Me outside.

Me thinks Tom is a dick.

To hear my thoughts, you'd have to imagine that I don't care for Frank – which is not the case at all. Now his son, Tom, that's one thing: that guy *is* a scrotum. But I like Frank. I really do. Sometimes I feel like grabbing him by the hair and driving my knee into his face, but he really is a nice enough guy if the situation permits it; and, perhaps best of all, he's the first person I have ever known who does not like at least one form of entertainment – and there has to be something to be said for that. At least not the type of entertainment that most prefer – the kind that you listen to or watch or read. He likes to drink, but that doesn't count: for Frank, like so many others in this town, drinking is much more an involuntary action, like the beating of his heart. He doesn't like sports – at least the ones that people get paid in money or education to play. And while he might go fishing or hunting with a friend, he'd never pick up a copy of *Bucks and Bows* or tune in to an episode of *Outdoors With Harry Grossman*. What is the point? And the best part, I think, is that he'd rather talk to a person and hear what they have to say than read a book. I guess that his wife, Sharon, for a few Christmases years past, has gotten him as gifts a few books on tape, authors that she thought he might enjoy – Clancy, Koontz, Crichton, King – stuff to listen to while at work with a busy order, or when in one of the De Munn vehicles (there are a total of four) on a long delivery. But, if you listen to Frank, and he drops his voice and steps a bit closer to me like he does whenever he talks about Sharon, conspiratorially, eyes brimming with malicious thought, almost as if we are friends, Why read, or listen to people read – whatever – when you can just as easily have a conversation?

“Well, that was MiGoche's on the phone,” Frank says as he backs out of the cooler with a large casket piece in one hand and an unfinished spray in the other. Frank flutters his fingers towards a bucket of carnations on the floor and I bring him the flowers. One hand a bunch of red carnations and the other his black handled jackknife and Frank talks while he works and I stand here waiting behind him. He's been on the Atkins diet for a few months now and it has worked, Frank has lost a serious amount of weight, but now he is in desperate need of a new wardrobe. His corduroys hang way too low for a man in middle age. And it's just about impossible for him to keep one of his Polos tucked in for any substantial period of time. If he were a true figure of authority, I might have trouble viewing him in that light. Fortunately, standing here looking at Frank from behind, shoulders slumped and head cocked to the side, he just reminds me of my father.

“Might as well take these first,” he goes from whatever he was saying, “because the damn viewing is earlier than I thought or has been moved up or some damn thing. Doesn't matter. MiGoche's, Rich,” and as he uses a hand to tuck the front of his shirt into his slacks, he takes a moment to look right at me, eyes wide as if he were talking to his grandson: “You know the one, right there on Maaaain St., across from the Sunoooooco....”

I've worked for Frank nearly five months now (about as long as I have lived here in Greenfield) and he still talks to me like it is my first day and I don't know MiGoche's Funeral Home from Yeral-Thaed's. Which in a way is okay, because there are times when I still get a bit disoriented, but on the other hand is completely annoying and I feel like going upside his head with a bud vase. It's pretty much day to day.

When Frank finishes some twenty minutes later I take and load the funeral work into the De Munn van with the rest of this run's deliveries; and, now, with these two orders, it's a pretty big one: accompanying the two long boxes full of poinsettias you have the dozen red roses arranged in a vase for a Mrs. Birdwood in guidance at the high school, a large, blatantly Christmassy centerpiece for a house on Norwood St., and a dish garden with fresh daffodils and an oversized, yellow smiley-face balloon for a woman named Vera who should just be out or just entering surgery at Memorial Hospital. With any luck I'll be out of the shop for an hour, maybe more.

Backing slowly down the drive.

Traffic is even lighter than usual – we here in Greenfield took about seven inches last night – and I take a snow-covered Williams south, towards Main. The De Munn van handles okay, but I take it slow. Underneath the fresh powder lies a layer of ice about an inch thick, has been there since the first major storm of the season, which hit a few weeks ago, the last day of November. De Munn tires creak and crunch the fresh powder into the ice, a sound that I can feel in my teeth. I don't know what it is about snow, but I really like it. I like it before it snows, too. Although then mostly in the day. With the sky leaden and low and on its side like a pregnant fish. Air as cool and as static as an unplugged electric blanket. Like now.

I slide to a stop at the intersection. I look over my shoulder, out the side window. All that I can see is white. Perfectly white. Against all this whiteness, of white fading into white, the uniform of relative darkness, the *obscure F's mmo. M. o. D.* decorating the side window doesn't look yellow at all; in fact, its outline looks as black as a crow.

This early in the morning we don't get any good sports talk – that won't come on until ten or so – so when I get sick of hearing the same news over and over I usually listen to The River in the morning. Pretty good station. It prides itself upon the celebration of musical diversity, but I have found that all that really amounts to is the occasional David Bowie tune in German and a lot steel guitar. Say what you will: it is different.

As far as U.S. cities go, Greenfield is pretty old; and, accordingly, it has its fair share of cool houses. I can easily see myself winding up on one of these tree-lined streets like Williams and those north of Main. Not much of a yard either in front or out back, but by the time I have gone and am done with college, have moved into a small house with my (eventual) wife Charlotte and (maybe to be had) daughter Joyce, gotten (possibly) pregnant again with James – we'll refer to them as the "J's" – and am ready to look for a larger house off of a street with entirely too much traffic and closer to town and the school, I don't think I'll be up for much gardening or mowing of the lawn. I'll probably even be paying some neighborhood kid to do it for me, so the less yard the more money I'll save. And by then Mason will be dead and gone, buried in Foster's Pet Cemetery for forty bucks. (A place that I do deliver to from time to time)

Most of these houses look the same and I'm sure this is because they were probably built about the same time: large, two and three story structures sided in different shades of blue, green, white, beige and yellow. Most with finished basements I'm sure. A quilt of homes with wide and painted wooden steps leading to screened-in front porches and front doors with gold and silver knockers bearing the names of their inhabitants. Mansons. **Bundys**. White, skeletal frames of reindeer in postures of feeding – this year's models even have moving heads – ensconced with glowing bulbs and jury-rigged to crab grass decorating their lawns. Bare trees out front covered in white and colored lights that do not get unplugged for weeks on end because it's winter and I'm in New England and it never really gets light for long anyway. Moving slowly down these roads I see different things every day – house numbers, cracks in the siding, a woman in a purple-blue bathrobe standing in front of her window watching me pass by, small oval plaques bearing the c. dates of the homes, paint instead of siding – that I had missed during the summer, before fall, when the trees full of leaves hid most of what these homeowners probably preferred hidden anyway. Preferably, I'd like to live in a brick home, or one of grey slate with ivy growing on the sides, but most of the brick or stone houses in town are on the way up and on top of Summit and Meeger Hills and unless MTA strikes a deal in the next few years I think I'll have to settle for a white cape down here. With black shutters.

Turning west onto Main I spot the yellow Sunoco bolt of a sign a ways down without especially meaning to. Main St. runs for a mile or two, before dipping into a traffic circle (or, up here, rotary) that empties you either on to 91 north, a road whose name I can never remember, 91 south, or, obviously, back here. But down there by the gas station and MiGoche's it's pretty crappy. Not that it is especially run down in any way, but the West End has absolutely none of the charm or the class that up here has, and, when juxtaposed with the East End, pales in comparison. Up here on the East End I drive past a series of warm, inviting shops – **JITTERS COFFEE**, Bsid's Records, Hair Ye Hair Ye, *Turning Leaves Used Books* – entire blocks of cafes and boutiques interrupted only by the occasional one-way street. There are a few really good places to eat. An old Wilson's department store, that, despite smelling a little off and feeling a little dusty, is pretty neat. A natural foods store named Pete's.

On the left, just past Town Hall, there's the moderate-sized green where on summer and fall Saturday mornings you can walk to the farmer's market. Myself, personally, I'm good on eating any vegetables that don't come from Stop-n-Save, but Charlotte and I still like to walk around and watch people talking to one another and inspecting tomatoes and squash as if they really know what they're doing. A fraternity of aging Deadheads, vegetarians, bike riders and would be anti-fur demonstrators (if Saddam had not invaded Kuwait) picking up and smelling and rubbing and tapping and squeezing, carrots and cabbages and cauliflowers, and, for some strange reason, cantaloupes. A lot of cut-off shorts and fading tank tops. And body hair. And bad pairs of glasses. It's what my sister Mallory would call extremely Greenfieldian. Many of these marketeers bring their own hemp, brown handled bags, that, despite a few stains, have held up as well as they expected. You can see some of them with the same bags at Stop-n-Save on Sunday mornings. For some reason, the bags are on sale at the Greenfield Free and Public Library for \$10.00.

Once you pass the Wilson Farms, though, things get a bit less perambulatory and a lot more WalMart. Main St. has two liquor (up here in Mass package) stores down here, and, kitty-corner, they sit glaring neon angrily at one other even on Sundays, so that any day of the week, whether coming or going, you don't have to cross traffic to pick up a handle of Seagrams or a thirty-pack of Genny Light. There is Fuller's Laundromat, that, as usual, is anything but. I went there once and the place was so dirty that anything you could think to bring in looked clean before even running a single cycle through one of their machines. Then it is the rows and rows of Mack Aster's Chevrolet. The smooth concaves and startling taillights of Mack's huge inventory glittering and winking whatever passes for light this early morning. And of course to your right, just past MamaMia's, is the funeral home where the poor bury their dead – if you believe what you hear, that is.

Flowers go out back. To get there, you have to swing through a narrow drive just barely wide enough for the De Munn van, eek yourself past a dumpster (which I have been know to hit on occasion) before throwing the van in park in MiGoche's wide, back parking lot, occupied today only by the home's two hearses: one black, one white. Because I'm wondering if people actually choose which color hearse they prefer to cart their deceased relative to St. Mary's or Stone St. cemetery in (the only two cemeteries in town), I am already inside and through the door and setting the arrangements on the carpeted floor of the main viewing room when I realize that I am not alone, that there is a body in a casket at the head of the room.

This, of course, is not unusual in any way. There are four or five funeral homes in town and only two florists – and I'm the only driver for one of them – so I've seen my fair share of lifeless corpses by now. When I was first hired though, it was a little strange to look down upon the bodies of people I didn't know. I realize that it might seem banal to say, but it really is a bit unsettling. I mean, it is seriously as if the room itself is more quiet because of the body lying in it. There is literally nothing in your ears. No humming. Nothing from the outside. It is as quiet as a caught breath.

Early on, I was transfixed by the body. I mean, my family is pretty small, and the only major deaths to have cropped up thus far in it (that being a grandparent on each side) both occurred far before I even understood what it meant to be sad, let alone link the concept with something like death, so I had no experience with even viewing lifeless corpses. In fact, come to think of it, I saw my first lifeless corpse here in Greenfield. It might have been nice for Frank or Tom to say, *Oh, and by the way Rich, you'll probably see a few bodies so be prepared*, but after reporting my first lifeless corpse sighting with something like surprise, Tom only offered: Wait till you see a little kid. I have not yet and pray that I never do, but if I was to say that Tom would just say: *You will*. To be fair, I suppose that Frank and Tom are so used to lifeless corpses that the thought I might be upset never crossed their minds. I guess I can give them that. And I'm not even saying that I've ever been upset about it. Because I haven't been, really. But it is a strange thing to see a lifeless corpse live and up close, and to have no association with it. You still feel sad in a way, but you can't direct your feelings anywhere right in front of you, which is where they immediately try to go, so after bouncing off of the body of the stranger your emotions are free to run amuck. You're left to think about what you will feel when your emotions do not bounce back and instead stick to the body and the familiar face in front of you. You will not notice the light-pink satin pillow or the fact

that you can see the reflection of your boots both inverted and regular off of the shiny black coffin. Hell, you won't even notice the coffin. You won't wonder if it is a wig because you'll know one way or the other. The person, for a dead person, will not look good, but dead. You won't think semantically about what it means to be drained of life because you'll be too busy missing someone to be thinking about anything else.

Underneath the dim, shadowy glow of a main viewing room, looking at the lifeless corpse of a stranger is almost worse than looking at the first corpse of a person I know because of the very fact that my emotions *are* running amuck and they are free to attach themselves to anyone that they please. Some people are off limits, like Charlotte. The idea of looking at her dead body is far too much and thus I will myself to refuse to. I suppose the same will be said for James and Joyce if they are ever born. But my Mom – that's not too far out there. Or my brother Chris; he flies quite a bit – closed casket. My father. My sister. Not only can it happen, it will. Usually it is my grandmother though. Her wide and simple beautiful face as cold and lifeless as a stranger's. Her lips not fixed in a smile because of course that is too perverse but set in a posture of complacency which might make it worse. I think I might be drawn to my grandmother first because she seems so close to it. Most likely though it is because I have a love for her that is identifiable.

I pull MiGoche's door shut behind me, hop into the De Munn van.

Looking at my face in the rearview mirror.

Me too, I think: I'm certainly not exempt. Turning the smooth, grey face of the control counterclockwise, from defrost to panel. It's a funny thing though, because I never picture myself. A large hunk of ice frees from the pattern created by De Munn windshield wipers, glides purposefully down the windshield, leaving, in its wake, a heavy, translucent trail, like a slug. Never picture myself lying flat on my back with my hands crossed over my chest. Shifting into drive. Odds-on, because there is nothing really sad in that. A left on to Main St. At least as I understand it.