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## Not Really Family

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# Not Really Family

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## About the Contributor (Optional)

Kimberly A. Eridon is a senior technical and professional communications major. She hopes to encourage people to think about the art they encounter, to discuss issues that arise from it, and to exercise discernment even when it's hard.

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## Not Really Family

Kimberly Eridon

Beth was crying before she even hung up the phone. The tears were coming so fast that she had to fumble the receiver into the cradle by touch. She stumbled into the kitchen, threw herself into a chair, and put her head down on the table. Then she sobbed.

She heard her uncle Tom's key in the lock, but she didn't care if he saw her half-laying on his kitchen table. They were both nearly 30, but he wouldn't make her feel silly. She was surprised when her uncle's boyfriend Kirby walked around the corner and through the archway, grumbling under his breath. When he saw her in the darkened kitchen, he stopped and stared at her. She hoped he might go to his room to avoid dealing with her, but instead he flicked on the light, which made her blink, then walked to the table and lowered himself into one of the wooden chairs without taking his eyes off her. She wanted to get up and away, but she was too tired to move, so she slumped, miserable and self-conscious.

"What did your mom say this time?" he asked.

She wanted to lie and protest that she'd just had a bad day at work, but she wasn't very good at lying, so she just looked at him and felt her lip actually *quiver* as more tears came to her eyes. She

hadn't thought she had any more left.

Kirby slid a tissue box across the table.

"Every time she calls, you fall apart," he said conversationally. "We should get an unlisted number or something," he said. "Then nobody's parents could call and make us cry." She wasn't sure if he was serious, so she looked at his face and still couldn't tell. He had on his usual half-smile and seemed to be studying the cupboard across the kitchen.

After a pause, he said. "You don't have to talk to her, you know."

"She's my mother," slipped out before she could think, and she looked down at the tissue in her hands.

"Well, she's practically Tom's mother, too, and she never talks to him . . ."

He seemed undisturbed by the silence, still casually draped over the chair, one leg swaying to some internal beat, or maybe he was as uncomfortable as she was.

"If you were my patient," he said after a few minutes, "I'd probably give you some antidepressants to take when you have to talk to her."

She looked at him, startled. He was smiling just a little; was he making fun of her? She felt the tears threaten and said, "I thought you guys were

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supposed to hug or talk about it or something.”

“Ah, no, that’s the other guys, the psychologists. I have a different motto,” he said matter-of-factly. “Drugs are better than hugs.”

She laughed once; it sounded to her like a sob. She studied her soggy tissue.

“Look,” Kirby said, standing and crossing to one of the kitchen cabinets, “I don’t want to pry, but I want to talk to you about this. Tom and I are worried about you. You just go to work and come home and read. And completely break down just about every time your mother calls; I almost forgot about that.” He grabbed a green plastic tumbler from the lowest shelf before turning to face her. “You’ve been here for over a month, and we feel like you’re a stranger passing through instead of family. Is it because we’re gay?”

She shook her head with more violence than she meant to. “I am not my mother.”

“Thank God,” Kirby said fervently, eyes lifted toward the ceiling in mock thanksgiving. Her smile was a little crooked; she could feel it. She drew another tissue from the box and wrapped it around the first.

“So if it’s not because we’re gay, why are you avoiding us?”

“I don’t know.” She watched as he turned the faucet on and filled the glass. “I guess I’m afraid she’ll come and ruin my life, and I’ll have to leave, and it would be unfair if I made a lot of friends when I know I’ll have to leave them.” She knew she wasn’t

making sense; she should go to her room.

“Again?” he asked, ambling back to the table.

She raised an eyebrow, wondering how much Tom had told him. “Tom’s told me about your, er, boyfriend troubles, and I know you moved here because she started messing up your other friendships, too.”

“She’s only doing it because she loves me; she just . . .” The tears started to gather.

Kirby jerked back, and she saw his lips compress into a thin line. “Oh, come on . . .”

“She’s coming tomorrow. She wants to meet Ben, and I know he’ll leave me, too.”

He took a sip of water, staring into the short depths for a moment before returning it to the tabletop. “And you like this Ben a lot? Could he be The One?”

Beth had not expected that.

“I mean it. Is this a guy you’re willing to fight for?” Kirby leaned over the table, intent, calculating lines creasing his forehead.

She wasn’t sure what to say. Ben seemed nice. He wasn’t bossy. He cared about some of the same things she did, like God, commitment, truth. Maybe he was worth a fight. “Yes.” She sat straighter, determination replacing despair. Then despair rushed back, “But how?”

A smile lit his eyes as Kirby leaned back, hands clasped behind his head. “Has your mother seen a picture of Ben? Does she know what he looks

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like?"

"No." Beth watched him as he stared up through the chandelier.

"Well, I know she hasn't seen me, and it just so happens that I have a reservation at a restaurant down town tomorrow night. Have you asked him if he can make it yet?"

"No."

"Good," Kirby said. "Then it's settled."

"What's settled?" she asked.

"We'll take your mother out, and you can pretend I'm Ben."

Beth blinked a couple of times. She finally shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand."

Kirby stood and began to pace in front of the table. "You don't want your mother to come and screw up another relationship. You won't warn Ben about what a . . . witch she is because you think that would be some sort of sin, which is bull, but that's not the point. You don't want him to hate your mother, especially *before* he's even met her, though I don't understand why since you know he'll hate her *after* he's met her. Ben would go in, unprepared for her, so he'd break up with you a little later since you won't stand up for him. If you faced down your mother, what would he think of you? And what would your mother think? This can't keep going." He stopped, waving a finger at her. "We have to break the cycle!"

"My mother isn't . . . Are you sure you're not a psychologist? You sound like my roommate

from college only more manic."

He laughed and assured her, "I've just thought about this subject a lot." He started pacing again, planning. "I'd be ready for her. You can feel free to confront her knowing that you're not embarrassing your boyfriend or showing him what a wretched and unholy daughter you are or whatever you think a confrontation would show. Since I'm sort of but not really family, I won't be embarrassed, and I won't think any less of you. And it's always good to have a psychiatrist available in these situations," he concluded.

She managed to choke out, "Why?"

"Because drugs are better than hugs, and I can sedate her if things get out of hand."

"You won't really drug her, will you?" Beth was stunned. And amused. She had known Kirby less than a month.

He stopped pacing and turned to face her, a prankster's grin forming, making his eyes crinkle at the edges. "Probably not. I'm just being melodramatic. If I start to get out of hand, let me know." His laugh was sheepish. "I'm sort of a control freak; Tom and I are working on that."

"What about Tom?" Beth suddenly realized the flaw in the plan Kirby was constructing.

Kirby looked frustrated, brow creasing, mouth going puckish at the corners. "He won't mind, especially since I don't plan on telling him when he calls tonight. Those idiots decided to send him to Nevada early. Apparently, they're afraid that if the

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chief engineer isn't there to oversee installation, someone will drop something vital and destroy Nevada.

"I'm going to go see if my suit needs dry cleaning. I was planning on wearing ratty jeans to the restaurant to annoy Tom, but I s'pose . . . Good night." Kirby stood and began to wander toward the master bedroom, grumbling about Tom's absence. "What could they possibly destroy in Nevada anyway? I doubt anybody really lives there . . ." His door closed.

Beth stood looking at her watery reflection on the polished wooden floor. When had she agreed to this insanity? What was she supposed to say to her mother? Sighing, she turned out the light and stumbled to her room to think. And pray.

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The atrium was all soaring ceilings and dimly lit pillars, marble floors, and wood paneling. She suddenly hoped she didn't have to pay for her meal.

They were both supposed to be looking around for Beth's mother, but Beth kept being drawn up to the night sky barely visible through the glass ceiling several stories above. She forced her eyes down and saw her mother conversing with a greying and well-dressed couple.

Beth sighed, smiling crookedly and envying her mother's ability to be friendly to complete strangers. Her mother was wearing something in a deep velvety green with a scarf that seemed to have a life of its own, and her long black hair was piled on

her head. In the dim lighting, Beth could barely see the tiny streaks of grey at the temples.

Someone in a tuxedo stopped behind the other couple and bent his head to address them. They nodded goodbye to Beth's mother who returned the courtesy with a small smile and then surveyed the thinning crowd. Beth noticed that there were still no wrinkles; her mother was just as beautiful as ever. She made eye contact with Beth and her genuine broad smile made her seem softer, less like a statue. She hurried over, arms spread wide to hug her daughter. Beth returned the hug, resting her chin on her mother's head and inhaling an unfamiliar sort of perfume, a sort of pale vanilla.

Kirby strolled over after disengaging himself from a conversation with a white-haired colleague from his psychiatric practice. "Mother, this is Ben," she lied with a smile, nudging Kirby forward.

"Very nice to meet you," Kirby lied sincerely, taking her mother's hand.

"I've heard so much about you," Beth's mother lied as she shook his hand. "I couldn't wait to meet you. Beth is my only child, you know, so I'm always looking out for her." She hugged Beth around the waist with one hand and then asked, "So you met in WalMart? I'm not sure that's a very good place for my daughter to be meeting young men."

With unfortunate clarity, Beth concluded that she would not survive the night.

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Beth realized that she was playing with her empty water goblet. She couldn't think what had brought her back from her daze when she was trying so hard not to hear anything her mother and Kirby said. Then she noticed a black tuxedo jacket to the right of her chair where a waiter was standing with a carafe of water. She nearly dropped the glass on the table in her haste to let him fill it again.

As she picked it up to take another swallow, her heart stopped. She couldn't have heard right because she wasn't listening. She had decided not to listen, and she was going to continue to not listen until she died or the evening ended. She listened to Kirby's voice, and her heart started beating again, double time.

"No, Mrs. Hamilton, I'm not saying that at all. What I am saying is that you don't seem able to handle the fact that your daughter and your brother are adults who can make their own choices."

Mouth hanging open, Beth's mother sat, frozen in her chair as live string music played on in the background. Beth noticed that her mother's fork hovered just above her salad plate.

"They love you, but you're crushing Beth with all your expectations and judgments, and you're killing Tom by hating him just because he made a choice you don't agree with."

"I do not hate my brother," Beth's mother said and then stopped, cheeks and ears reddening. Her fork dropped to her plate.

Kirby picked up his wine glass and sipped

from it. Beth could not believe how calm he was, how reasonable, how emotionless. She suddenly realized what people meant when they said someone was being clinically detached.

"Why can't you be more like Beth? She's religious, but she doesn't hate her own uncle because he's made a choice she doesn't agree with. What are you afraid of? That your daughter might actually choose something you don't like? That she might be gay? God, you're such a fool. Beth's bought into everything you say you believe; she really believes it. I would even say she really lives it; that's how I know she believes it. But you," sudden scorn and contempt filled Kirby's voice, "you act like you care and you talk about love, and you throw your little brother who you practically raised out of your house because you didn't think he was good enough to be loved."

"I . . ." Beth saw that her mother's jaw was tensed, that her scarf was quivering, that she couldn't say anything without starting to cry.

Kirby took a deep breath and then another sip of wine. When he started talking again, the emotion was leached from his voice once more. "So now you hold on even tighter to this one, and you don't realize that you're driving her away by squeezing her so tight she can't think. You can't keep trying to control her like this, or she'll run screaming away from you and never come back." He seemed dispassionate, utterly precise, controlled. She knew he was out of control.

Her mother sat, face a bloodless mask with

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eyes that seemed too large. Beth found herself trying to blink away tears. It wasn't working.

She stood, dropping and nearly tripping over her cloth napkin as it fell from her lap when she excused herself and rushed toward the ladies' room. She closed and locked the middle stall door before sitting on the wooden seat cover and breaking down completely.

When she heard a knock at the outer door of the restroom, she didn't think she'd been there for more than five minutes, though she couldn't be sure.

"Beth," Kirby whispered from the other side. She didn't move but simply sat, tears leaking through her closed eyelids, clutching a wad of toilet paper she'd collected in a futile attempt to stem the tide.

"Beth," Kirby whispered. She continued to cry and tried to block out the desperation in his tone. It was his own fault. He'd said that he had problems with control; he said it was her night to talk to her mother like an adult, but instead, he just, just started telling her mother what he thought about her. He shouldn't have said those things to her mother even if . . .

She grabbed more toilet paper and tried to tear off a long piece, but somehow it got jammed and wouldn't catch on the edge of the dispenser to rip. As if public humiliation and proof that she wasn't in control of her life weren't enough, she couldn't even tear a stupid piece of toilet paper.

She knew she was being unreasonable, but

she wanted to feel miserable. She pulled again, then yanked. It tore suddenly, and the force she was using slammed her hand into the wooden stall divider. She bit her lip against the pain and buried her left hand in her right before leaning over it and rocking miserably for a second. Now her tears were of pain as well as self-pity, anger, frustration, and other emotions she didn't want to analyze at the moment. She knew she was being immature, but she didn't care.

"Don't make me come in there and drug you," Kirby threatened with normal volume. He must have realized that no one else was in the ladies' room. *Rats*. She would have to say something. It would have to be final and firm to make him leave her alone.

Rubbing her sore hand, she said the first thing that came into her mind. "Go away." Oh, brilliant. She covered her face with her hands at how pathetic she sounded.

"That's more like it," Kirby encouraged. "Are you okay?"

She wanted to laugh. She didn't say anything.

"Come on; you were doing so well for a while there."

"Please, Kirby, go away. I just want to be alone." *And miserable*, she added to herself.

"I can't go away until you come with me. The soup just came, and I ordered for the main course."

"Oh, God, help me." They'd barely made it through the salad before things had gotten this bad?

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She could never survive the main course. She slumped sideways and rested her head on the stall divider. "God, please kill me now."

"I'm coming in." He sounded worried.

"No, you're not!"

"If you don't come out, I'm coming in. I need to talk to you."

The tears started again. "Haven't you humiliated me enough?" She hated herself for sounding so pitiful.

"Not yet."

"Go away."

The door to the ladies' room opened. She started dabbing at her eyes with the soggy wad of toilet paper. "Please, go away and leave me alone," she almost wailed.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" The voice was polite, concerned, and female. This was not Kirby. How embarrassing.

Beth sat up and grabbed more toilet paper. Trying to muffle her sniffles and not sound too congested, she answered, "Fine, thank you."

When the woman did not proceed into any of the stalls, Beth began to wonder what she was doing there. As Beth tried to blot at the water stains on her collar and lap, she realized that this woman must be the one who gave you towels and hand lotion if the restaurant was fancy enough; she must have been taking a break or something.

Feeling trapped, Beth wondered where she could go to hide. She stood for a while and tried to

think and straighten her clothing. The tear stains were obvious on her dress, and she didn't even want to know what her face looked like. She definitely didn't want to see the attendant's pity—that softening of the eyes and the knowing smirk that twisted a fake smile, or even a real one, into something condescending. She hoped the attendant would go away on another break very soon.

Or maybe not. She was probably keeping Kirby out.

The door to the ladies' room opened again, and the attendant said, "I'm sorry, sir, this is the . . . Kirby!/? Long time no see. How've you been?"

Beth stood in the stall and slowly leaned forward until her head rested on the door. She resisted the urge to draw attention to herself by actually banging it into the door. Several times. She felt very odd listening from the ladies' room of a five star New York City restaurant as Kirby and "Michelle" talked about life since high school. Was this what surreal meant?

After some catching up, Kirby said, "Listen, 'Chelle, I'm here with the young lady hiding out in that bathroom stall, and I need to talk to her in private. Could you sort of stand guard outside the door?"

"No problem." Michelle, the traitor, didn't even object. The door closed behind her, and Kirby and Beth were alone. She waited.

With a sigh, Kirby asked, "You're not coming out, are you?" She didn't bother to say anything.

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She listened as he entered the stall next to her, closed and locked the door, and sat down. Again she resisted the urge to bang her head on the door.

"Look, Beth, I just wanted you to know that I told your mother who I am and took all the blame for this stupid idea because, well, it was my idea." He waited.

When the silence began to seem loud, he said, "I need to explain why that just happened. Tom and I haven't told you anything about my past because you've never asked either of us, and we didn't feel it would be appropriate to say anything until you did. We were treating you like a child, like your mom does, and we were wrong."

She was curious, but she didn't respond. He sighed.

"When I was in college, I realized I was gay." He paused, and she knew he was waiting for her to react, to say, "It's a choice." She refused to say a word.

"I understand that you don't want to talk to me after I humiliated your mother like that in front of you. I shouldn't have done it when you were there, but, damn it, someone needed to tell that woman off before she destroyed you, too!" She heard his breathing quicken and then catch.

"God, I'm sorry, Beth. I can't . . . I can't make excuses. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I told my parents during my senior year at spring break, and they basically told me they never wanted me to darken their doorstep again. They're good ole'

Catholics, you see."

He sounded so bitter that she stood up straight and turned to face his stall.

"Anyway, I haven't seen my little sisters and brother in over eight years." She could tell he was trying to sound detached again, but it wasn't working very well.

"The only thing I've heard from my parents in the last six years is, 'We refuse to talk to you or listen to you until you come to your senses and rejoin the holy church' or whatever. Every time I call. It's like they've got it memorized or written next to the phone or something. Sometimes they call me and repeat it or leave it on the answering machine, just for kicks, I think."

After a short pause, he added, "They make the kids screen the calls through the answering machine so they won't talk to me."

Beth was stunned.

"The thing is, I always knew their religion was just show. It was a lifestyle, not a life or whatever you call it. I wanted to laugh even then; we were always so fake. When I found reality, they didn't want to lose their lifestyle, so they threw me away, and the kids - they're a lot younger than I am, and they believe it. My little sisters and brother think I'm some kind of ultimate evil, and my parents hate me. I thought they loved me enough to keep loving me even if we didn't agree."

"My mother *does* love Tom," Beth blurted. All sounds of motion stopped in the

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neighboring stall. Quietly, Kirby said, "Does she? If she's willing to throw him away because he disagrees, does she love him?"

"Yes," Beth said. She paused and thought. "I think she's just afraid that . . . if she keeps treating him like she did . . . before - he'll think she approves or something. I don't know. She'd never talk about it with me. She just said I shouldn't talk to him."

"But you did anyway." She wasn't sure she'd heard him.

"I'm an adult. I did because I knew that God loved him, and I loved him, too. That doesn't mean that I think he's doing right, but I'm not going to hate him because of that." She sat down on the seat and leaned back against the tank of the toilet.

"If you know that, how can you defend a mother who does hate him because of that?"

"She doesn't hate him; she's just scared," Beth repeated. Her voice sounded uncertain in her ears. She changed the subject. "You shouldn't have said those things to her, Kirby. You shouldn't talk to people like that. You shouldn't have said what you did."

She heard some clunks and suddenly Kirby's head appeared over the divider. She realized he was standing on the toilet seat. "I think I love you, Beth, and I think I know why Tom loves you so much, too. You want everyone to be good, but we're not all good. Some people are evil."

"And my mother is not one of them," Beth insisted.

"Yeah, she's just bigoted, narrow-minded, and hateful."

The tears threatened again. Beth looked down at her lap, letting her hair hide her face, and tried to sniff quietly.

"Beth, I'm sorry." He laid his forehead on the divider and banged it gently several times. "Why can't I shut up? I don't know how Tom stands me." She could barely hear him as he mumbled into his sleeve.

She stood, reached out a hand, and patted his left hand once before sitting back down. He peeked at her over the top of the divider. His eyes looked both sad and hopeful.

"He would be so happy if she would just smile at him once and say that she loves him even though he's gay," Kirby pleaded. "But she won't even talk to him. It's tearing him apart."

"She does love him; she's just scared. She wants to do the right thing, but she doesn't know what the right thing to do is."

"Did you know that Tom defends her sometimes, just like you?" Kirby's voice sounded oddly angry, high and tight with tension. "'She's not all bad,' he'll say. He still loves her even when she treats him like he's a pariah. I can't understand that. I hate my parents for being who they are and turning the kids against me. I just don't get it." He stared at the gold leaf painted on the fine wallpaper on the other side of her stall.

Beth didn't know what to say. "I guess he

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knows she's human," she finally said.

"Yeah." Kirby's brow was wrinkled, his face twisted into a bitter grimace. "As human as the next religious homophobe." His eyes seemed far away. Remembering? She could tell he didn't believe her. "Anyway, that's what led up to that tirade. I have a lot of repressed emotion about my parents, and, since I can't vent on them . . . It's like playing matchmaker to forget about your lousy love life or something. It doesn't work well."

"At least I don't feel quite so scared about asking my mother for some space after your, er, speech," Beth said.

"I *am* sorry I took her apart in front of you, Beth, sorry it humiliated you." He looked at his hands, now clasped in front of his chin; his knuckles were white from tension. "But I'm not sorry that I said those things. They were all true. But you're right; I'm an adult, and I shouldn't lose control like that. This was supposed to be *your* night to explain that you're an adult. And you do seem to be one, unlike some people I know who have no self control." His eyes looked empty and sad, almost bleak.

After a moment, Beth said, "Look, Kirby, you know what I think about homosexuality, right? That it's wrong?"

Slumping, he nodded.

"Well, I want you to know something else: I love you, Kirby. I'd be happy to tell you why later, when you have some time."

She watched shyly for a reaction. Was it her

imagination, or did his knuckles look less strained white? And was he ducking his head so she wouldn't see that light reflecting off of . . . tears? She was probably imaging it.

Then he sniffed surreptitiously and half-sighed, half-whispered, "Thank you." She wasn't sure he'd said anything. "Thank you," he said again, audibly this time.

To her embarrassment, she felt her ears getting hot and probably turning bright red. Not that she could look any worse than she already did, no matter how much time she spent in the bathroom.

"So anyway, we've been in here long enough. Let's go get this night over with," she suggested, feeling suddenly weary.

Kirby sighed and bumped his forehead against the top of the divider a couple more times. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you," he said again.

"I forgive you," Beth said. "In fact," she added, deciding to try to make him smile, "I doubt anyone but my mother and Michelle will know anything's wrong until I go out there looking like this."

Kirby raised a brow in question. Beth tried not to grin as she explained, "That waiter must have refilled my water glass three times; he must think I'm actually in here to, you know, use the restroom." The attempt was bad, and she knew it, but it worked.

For the first time that night, Kirby looked directly into her eyes and laughed.