

# Non- stalgia.

Real life.

Rewritten.



Edited by Summer Jewel Keown & Ryan Everett Felton

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&  
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# More Crowns

C.T. Lisa

I'm a little less than reliable when it comes to, you know, like, the essentials. The yearly stuff, the check-ins. I don't know. I tend to avoid things.

The last time I tried to go to the dentist wasn't exactly a pleasant experience. I was in college. I hadn't been in probably six years, but I'd been flossing religiously and figured that would be enough. My grandma had been a dentist and was always going on about flossing. Truth be told, I only went because, being on the school football team and all, we had a pretty decent dental plan. That was part of the whole scholarship thing—they gave us insurance. They considered it a job, I guess. Perks and

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benefits and all that. Not that we understood how it all worked, or anything.

It all started when Coach gave us the afternoon off the first week of the semester to go get all of our visits taken care of.

“Go get those chompers trimmed, Big Time!” he barked at me. He smacked my behind with questionable enthusiasm and handed me a very unofficial-looking white envelope with my name written on it in green colored pencil. He nodded me toward the office door and motioned the next player in. I stepped out into the hallway. The rest of the team was lined up against the wall in a kind of ad hoc assembly line, nobody talking to each other; just a bunch of faces, isolated, texting or staring off. I turned a corner and opened up the envelope, which wasn’t actually sealed. The flap had been tucked in. I set my backpack down next to an inoperative water fountain. The custodial staff had taped a piece of yellow legal paper over it that simply read, “Please Do Not.” It seemed like a sufficient warning.

I pulled my phone from my backpack and called my grandma to ask her how dental insurance worked.

“Who’s your carrier?” she asked.

“DMO’ I told her, reading the card. “Wasn’t he a rapper?”

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“That’s the plan type, honey. The carrier, the insurance company—Aetna, Blue Cross. Who carries your policy?”

“What side is that on?” I was holding the card up in the air like a rare gem, squinting. “I can’t read this fucking thing. The font is microscopic.”

“Language, honey.”

“I feel like I’m examining a clue from *The Da Vinci Code*.”

“Please don’t mention that movie to me. You know it makes me think of your mother. That dreadful woman.”

“What about that movie could possibly make you think of mom?” I pocketed the card and crumpled the envelope into a ball and shot it into the trash can beside the window. Two points.

“She’s a lying profligate!” Grandma screamed. Then she settled back into herself. “Apologies. You’ll have to excuse me, I haven’t yet had my coffee. I’m sitting out by the pool, sunning myself, like the crocodile I am.”

“You really don’t have to go on about her like that,” I said. “We’re on the same side, pretty much.”

“Do you know what I’m doing? I’m watching the little robotic cleaner scrub the pool—have you seen these? They snake their way around the rim, dragging a net. I’ll set the coffee once it reaches the waterfall. After that, I’ll check the PH level on the

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console by the garage. This is my routine now. I watch the machines. I'm needlessly old, honey."

"Well, you've earned it, G-ma," I said. Over the line I heard birds chirping, distant lawnmowers.

"You know, you really ought to be learning these things on your own, Big Time. I can't tell you how insurance works any more than I can tell you how Buddhism works. You have to take that journey by yourself."

"I just figured you'd know how to do all this."

"Good thought, but I never dealt with the insurance companies when I ran my practice. I'm just one person, you know. A human being. I did the dental work—drilling, scraping. I gave people crowns."

"Crowns," I repeated.

"Yes. 'More crowns than the Habsburgs,' I used to say. Which was funny, because of their notorious underbite. That family had the jaws of deep-sea vermin. Do you know about the Habsburg Empire?"

"Did they invent dental insurance?"

"They were an Austrian monarchy. I sometimes like to imagine I'm related to them, or the Bohemians. And not that Freddie Mercury character, speaking of teeth."

"I'm sure you made a lot of people's bites smoother."

"*Smooth* has nothing to do with it. Dentistry is a subspecies of mathematics, as is music. They're all the same

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discipline, as far as I'm concerned. Look. The insurance information, your grandfather handled all that for me. So he would have been the person to talk to, God rest his soul. After that came your mother, who stole more money from my practice than Bernie fucking Madoff himself."

"Language, Memaw," I said.

"My point being that I truly don't know how insurance works. Or if it even works at all, for that matter. Based on what I read in the news, it seems like the whole insurance racket is bound to come crashing down pretty soon. But regardless, you're due for a cleaning, I'm sure."

"You still 'read' the news? Like paper?"

"It's coffee time. I need to go. Tell your dentist you don't want the fluoride unless they have bubble gum flavor."

"What?"

She hung up.

Did that bother me? A little, yeah. I was planning on just kind of winging it with the insurance—I mostly called grandma because I was looking to talk.

Anyway, I walked out of the athletics admin building through the back stairwell, which opened up to the quad between the athletics building and the medical school.

I always thought it was weird, us having a medical school. It didn't seem fair. To them, I mean. Those people were doing real work, scribbling up a damn storm in the front of their classes, and meanwhile here's me, way up in the tippy



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top of the lecture hall, watching *The Wire* on my laptop every day, sixty minutes at a time, with my hoodie pulled up to hide my earbuds. We were living in two different worlds.

Anyway—so I'm walking, two-strapping my backpack, ambling across the quad with my brand-spanking-new insurance card tucked inside my pocket. It was an overcast day; the sky was the color of dirty soap. Long-sleeve weather. It seemed like the whole world had come outside. The quad was always full like that, like a carnival. There were people handing out flyers for some kind of bake sale. There was a girl walking barefoot across a slackline drawn between two mighty oaks. She was wearing a black t-shirt and wine-colored chinos, rolled up to her knees. She had her eyes closed.

So, eventually, I got to the parking garage. Stepped in, took the elevator to the top where it's just the sky hanging low above you, no ceiling.

I walked from the elevator to the car, enjoying the view, the shifting breeze coming through the treetops, swinging my lanyard like a security guard. I look over and, leaning up against the passenger-side door of my car, I see Katrina, this smarty-pants girl from my Tuesday/Thursday economics class. "How's the air up here?" I called to her. The place was deserted.

Katrina looked at me, she seemed concerned. She wore a purple beanie and a purple coat. It was the kind of conspicuous color coordination that makes a person look like a

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comic book superhero walking around in plain clothes. Her arms were folded. “Hey, Big Time,” she said. “Please just listen to me. I’m in no mood for your judgement.”

“Well how about my *spearmint*?” I raised an eyebrow and made a show of reaching into the pockets of my sweatpants as if I had some gum. I never carried any gum.

She gave me a quizzical look. “Listen, I’m serious. I’ve been rehearsing this speech in your car mirror for the last fifteen minutes.”

“How did you know I was coming?”

“I know your schedule. But not because I’m creepy or anything. I’m a keen observer, it’s what I’m all about. It’s my major.”

“You’re studying to be an eye doctor?”

“No. International affairs. We observe economic trends and trade agreements. Anyway, it was Annelise, my roommate. She told me which car to look for. She said, ‘it’ll be an orange Ford Taurus—look for the car that’s parked like a family of raccoons took it for a joyride.’”

She gestured open-handedly to my rear tire, which was admittedly a good two or three feet over the line.

Katrina went on. “Annelise was your lab partner in ‘Intro to Meteorology’ last semester, in case you don’t remember. You gave her a ride home from class after that staged tornado drill.”

“She had a very convincing shriek,” I said.

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We caught stray notes and rhythms from what I had to assume was the marching band practice, some ways off on the recreational athletic fields. The wind blew, pigeons fluttered, cars hummed down below. Katrina sighed, raking her hat down below her ears before she began to tell me why she'd come. "I'll start off by saying this," she said matter-of-factly. "I'm a human being, Big Time. Human. Anthropolos, it's a Greek word. I'm halfway between the apes and the angels. A human. You believe me? And I made a mistake. A big effing mistake. No judgement."

"Did you fail one of those online take-home quizzes?" I said. "Don't worry, you can resubmit them. My tutor showed me how. He's one of those 'hactivist' people, with the ponytails."

"This isn't about economics, you dingus."

"Hey, no need for that."

"Look, you and I, we don't know each other that well. All I know about you is that you helped my friend and you watch critically-acclaimed television shows on the sly on your laptop. This inclines me to think you have good taste and morals, a chivalric need to help strangers in grim situations."

I shook my head, like I was trying to be modest. Katrina took a long sip from her water bottle. I stuck out my hand, thinking she was about to offer some to me, but she just capped it and shook her head like an impatient bus driver. "I need a

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favor. There's no good way to say this, so I'll just say it." She paused to gather herself. "I've lost my sister."

I gasped.

She put an apologetic hand over her mouth. "Oh, no—not like that. That came out wrong. She isn't dead. She's lost, missing."

"Oh. Lost," I repeated.

"Yes. Lost. Like that television show I saw you watching before you started *The Wire*. With Damon Lindelof."

"I actually kind of liked the ending," I said. "I told my grandma this the last time I saw her, and she called me a 'philistine.' What does that word mean, 'philistine?' Is that Greek, too?"

"I'm not sure."

"My grandma also described my mom as a 'profligate' on the phone. I assume it has something to do with her being an abusive alcoholic and a thief. I love how open I can be with you—I'm never like this. This is her car, by the way. Mom had to forfeit her license after she was institutionalized the second time. But she's out now. I think she's living in a trailer park upstate."

Katrina rubbed her chin and scrutinized me. "You don't seem like a child of abusive parents."

"Parent, singular. I have many demons, Katrina. But trauma is in the eyes of the believer, as I always say."

"What, are you some kind of amateur aphorist, too?"

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“I’m a fucking survivor, is what I am.”

“Language, dude.”

“Sorry.”

“Look, the bottom line is that I need your car. Here’s the deal: my little sister Talia was here on a college visit. She got in on Friday. I took her to a bar. I said don’t judge me, okay? So, we had some drinks, we danced, we got debauched and rowdy. She ended up running off with a pack of goth-looking jerks while I was shooting pool with my poli sci TA, who is admittedly a bit of a flirt. Her name’s Freddie.”

“Mercury?”

“Talia has been missing since the weekend, so two days. My parents won’t let her have a cell phone because she’s only in high school and she’s more than a little rebellious on a good day. Nobody knows about this, so please don’t say anything.”

I pantomimed a lip-clipping zip.

“But, here’s where things get interesting,” she went on. “We found her.”

“Huh. You’re natural police, are you?”

“No, it wasn’t me. It was Annelise. She was coming out of the art supply store this morning and saw my sister hanging out in the parking lot with those same goth hooligans. They were handing out fliers to the customers, all of them wearing matching outfits. Black t-shirts and wine-colored chinos, dyed hair and all of that. You see, it’s a uniform. Talia recognized Annelise and

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they all bolted into an alley. But Annelise took one of their fliers and did some digging. It was propaganda they were handing out, apocalyptic stuff—paganism, pragmatism, paranoia, et freaking cetera. It was a recruiting tool. They're a cult. My sister joined a cult, Big Time."

"Well, you sound calm enough," I said. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm coping. I take deep breaths. There was an episode of *Gilmore Girls* where this exact thing happened, more or less. I keep reminding myself this to keep the panic from drifting too close. 'It's not real,' I say to myself; 'you're just trapped inside an Amy Sherman-Palladino nightmare.' By the way, you should add that show to your list, if you haven't seen it. Watch it after *The Wire*."

"Noted. So you need a ride?"

"Yes. I also might need your big dumb-muscled football body to use as a battering ram. It is a cult, after all. But we can evaluate that as the situation unfolds. What do you say?"

Here's the truth: I didn't go to the dentist that day, nope. Truthfully, I don't know how much intention I ever really had of going. I think more than anything I was just looking for a sense of accomplishing something, feeling useful. Katrina needed help and I needed a win. I wasn't recklessly eager or even particularly scared about the whole

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ordeal. I felt like I was agreeing to drop her off at the airport.

We got in my car. I curled around the spiral ramp and out of the garage. We drove over some speed bumps, passed the campus art museum and the library and the vet school, the cemetery. We got on the highway and headed south. She was guiding me, following some directions she'd written down in a spiral notebook.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she said in a voice that sounded more or less rehearsed. She didn't look up from her notebook. "Why do they call you that? Big Time."

"It's my name."

"No it isn't."

"It is."

"I sincerely doubt it. That isn't a name at all."

"It's my name, it's what people call me."

"No, it isn't a name. It can't be a name. It's, like, an adjective or something. Or a strata you have to ascend into—'the big time.'"

"I'm only a division 3 football college football player, if that's what you're getting at. Most of our games aren't even televised."

"You're telling me that this is written on your birth certificate? That you came screaming into worldliness as a bright and red little polyp, and your parents decided to call

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you something as idiotic as ‘Big Time?’ Even if your mother is a bona fide dingus that still doesn’t sound accurate to me. No. That’s what your Coach calls you, isn’t it? It’s a football name. It has to be. It’s simple, it has two syllables. He calls you ‘Big Time’ because you make big, timely plays—what’s your position, anyway? Not that I’d understand.”

“I’m the kicker,” I said. “And speaking of names, what about this cult? Do they have a name?” I looked over my shoulder to change lanes. Katrina flipped through her notebook.

“They call themselves ‘The Spawn of Habsburg,’ have you heard of them?”

I furrowed my brow. “Only a little,” I said. “My grandma was telling me about them this morning. I think they’re Australian anarchists or something.”

“Jesus Christ,” Katrina gasped.

I reached out to hold her hand to comfort her, but she pulled away and smacked me across the back of the head.

We drove off into the maroon dusk. The sky was the color of squid ink and poison. We took the exit, wove our way around the shopping centers and car dealerships. We drove past a decaying laser tag studio that shared a parking lot with an adult superstore, turned left at a warehouse that sold swing sets.

Eventually, the street turned to gravel. We kept going at an even crawl until the way was blocked by some construction



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equipment. We parked the car and got out. We crept our way along the road until we made it to a wall of twisting trees. We found a path, tumbling down into the dark. We followed that as best as we could, going slow, gripping trunks, finding our way by snatches of light. We climbed over stumps and had our shoes sucked by muddy pits. I slid down a ravine and landed on a raccoon which stood up on its back legs and hissed at me like some possessed sock puppet before disappearing into the underbrush. But we kept going, through the brambles and the pines. Katrina ripped her shoe on some barbed wire buried in the dirt, but insisted we didn't stop. We crept into a cave. We saw an eerie orange glow in the distance. We neared it, closer. A fire and candles, and there they were, the Spawn of Habsburg themselves, a crude circus of twenty or so cultists. They wore rolled-up chinos and walked criss-cross slacklines strung above a massive tank of water. I saw crocodiles rolling in the froth beneath them. The walkers stooped and swayed. A vibrant male-female pair of what I assumed were twins took turns leapfrogging each other while a fit and mean-looking woman did a pike-stiff handstand on an adjacent line. They looked like some sinister family acrobatic troupe. The crocodiles snapped, the cultists bounced and bounded above. Some crawled like geckos along the wires. But no one fell or gave any indication of losing their balance. These were expert slackliners. I thought of the girl from the quad. Were they living among us?

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As we watched the scene, I couldn't help but identify with these strange and diligent people. There was something helpless and desperate about it all, something reactionary. They didn't seem to be practicing rigorous discipline in their elaborate acrobatics—it was escapism, brazen avoidance. They had developed a method of distracting themselves from something—modern life, market culture, their vision of an apocalypse, whatever had been written on those fliers. I thought of my own gymnastic avoidances that day, the things I wasn't doing.

I turned and whispered to Katrina. “Look—if we're seriously going to do this, I'm gonna need a minute.”

“Like fuck you do!” she hissed.

“Shhhh! Language, Katrina. I'm sorry, but I have something important I need to take care of. Just keep an eye on this, okay?” I gestured toward the slackliners, who appeared to be in the process of forming some crude human pyramid in the middle of the wire. “I'll be back.”

I crawled out of the cave and started walking through the empty woods. I found a rock, and sat there for a while, scrutinizing the silence. I thought about my family. I thought about something that had been bothering me. Then I took out my phone. I dialed and I let it ring.

Look, I don't want to walk you through the whole bloody history of my relationship with my mom. Over the years,

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it shifted between being a fact and a fiction, let's just put it that way.

As the phone rang, I thought about our last fight. I wanted to take it back. I had called her up and asked about something completely inconsequential and erupted into some blood-thirsty version of myself and screamed at her. I'd called about filing my financial aid forms or my taxes or something. One of those mundane paperworky tasks that lurks in your periphery with the potential of leaving you feeling small and clumsy and utterly ill-equipped to grow into adulthood. I'd called her a "fucking fuck" and hung up. I don't even remember what she'd said to prompt it. Maybe the outburst had been lurking beneath my skin for a while.

My mom did some awful stuff to me. I don't know if I'll truly ever be able to forgive her. But I wasn't a delight to be around myself. I mean, a "fucking fuck?" What does that mean? Does it have meaning? It was a Molotov cocktail; I just lit the thing on fire and threw it at her. It was the kind of vicious bile you can only get across through pure dialogue. Who says things like this? What kind of monster am I? My mother is beyond unstable, she has a disease. Was I telling her to go and off herself?

Teeth. The visible part of the tooth, this is called the crown. It's just the tip, the part you can see—beneath the skin are the roots. Teeth are just bones out of hiding. There is what

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we see and the thing itself; roots and crowns, words and their meaning. My mother needed help, not hate. Not my half-chewed profanity.

But, of course, I didn't say any of this to her. Not in that moment as I called her in the woods, and not for a long time afterward.

Instead, speaking calmly into her answering machine, I simply said this:

“Hey mom. It's me. I was wondering if you knew what ‘DMO’ stands for? School gave me dental insurance.”

I hung up. I padded back through the leaf litter and stooped my way into the cave until I found Katrina, crouched and eager, looking peeved.

“Ready?” she sighed.

“Ready.”

## INSPIRATION

“More Crowns” was inspired by my own tendencies of avoidance. Several strange and seemingly disparate events ended up lodging themselves in the wispy rear of my mind, culminating in this story—most notably, a wacky evening in which I was recruited to help a complete stranger find her debauched younger sister after losing her at a college party. I shaded around this central focus with exaggerations of a fight I got into with my family, as well as a recent trip to the dentist I do not hesitate to call “traumatic.” Plus, like the main character, I also don’t know how insurance works, despite having worked as a copywriter for an insurance company for 3+ years.