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SUCH A LONG WAY TO FALL

by Nelson C Eshelman

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You have such a long way to fall, from that blithe, sunny school girl, freckles dancing lightly on high cheekbones. Graduating valedictorian, voted by your teachers most likely to succeed. Gregarious, admired, precocious, naive. Shrieks of merriment, you giggle with your best friend as you dream about boys and pen sonnets, teenage angst in the margins of Rexall scribblers.

You marry your high school sweetheart, life is good now, idyllic. Until you actually try to get pregnant, but your scarred ovaries are screwed up from a botched abortion, your second, still your young husband assures that he'd rather have you than have children. Gracious comfort in the face of a setback. Channel energies into a family business, the grocery store you both take over from his deceased uncle.

Years of toil, ever the competent manager, countless hours stocking tins of canned vegetables on rows of towering shelves, you mind the crabby cashiers, bully stiff bagboys and check till tapes with tired eyes till the wee hours of the early morning, every morning, because the store is always open, even Sundays.

Such a long way to fall, on a day when you wake up, fifteen years later, to sagging breasts in a cracked, bathroom mirror and a crying, creviced face, the day after you discover your husband is having an affair with a delicatessen clerk. Yet you don't let on for months, you just can't concentrate. The company's books get botched up as instead you sit for hours surfing the internet amid unkempt, yellowing papers strewn about on the floor in a cubby-hole of an office, and then one day, without warning, you run out and buy a Mercedes Benz on your joint American Express card, fully-loaded, the most expensive model on the lot, before adding to your wardrobe two of everything decent they stock in your size at Holt Renfrew, plus a fifty thousand dollar diamond ring. Afterwards, your husband admits you to a mental hospital for a month, only partly as a precaution to unwind the expensive contracts you ran up during your spree. For you were also upset, threatened to kill yourself.

"You stupid bitch!" he called you, but the fawning shop girls didn't call you bitch, they treated you like a queen for one fleeting afternoon.

Now he wants to have kids, so he's leaving you, but you leave him first, after having a fling with a personal fitness instructor. You move to New York to become an author, something you'd always wanted to do, once dreamed of as a

girl, but never had the time for. Find solace in new friends you make at city college, they're young, fun and crazy, support you in your writing, critique and instruct you, just as you buoy them along in their efforts.

Such a long way to fall, for rejection is anticipated now, expected, promised, a rite of passage, your short stories and then your first manuscript. Bright and shiny, breathy, wordy. So proud to complete it, to show it off, ship it off to those publishers, who ignore it, but still you try, researching quaint small house presses that seem a perfect fit for your one source of focus, locus of your energy, showcase of your talent, channel for your frustration, though you never stop to calculate how many other budding wonders grace the halls of academia, how many scattered tomes languish, dusty chapbooks unread on library shelves and discount stockpiles. You only learn as time passes how shopworn those same thoughts are you once sought to share, prosaic gestures in formulaic prose, as you run into writers who wield far more talent in the nub of one ink refill than you could ever hope to garner in ten gigabytes of memory. Words don't come easy for you, you labour to put images on paper, and only then in short choppy segments that lack lustre, focus, cohesion, dialogue, plot, back story or any negligible sense of suspense.

Yet things feel fine for a while as you plough on with your forgetting, your writing, until the money runs out, because by that time your ex-husband's business goes bust, you were once the glue that held it all together, but he drank away what he hadn't gambled on an unsuccessful restaurant venture, his new girlfriend's pet project.

Those with tenfold your perseverance and dozens of published pieces linger wretchedly in semi-obscenity, while you push to get your second poem into print, knowing your first effort was only accepted because it's a tasteless, graphic sexual ditty that stirred some prurient editor's bland libido. Tell us how it feels when it finally dawns on you after six months and your fortieth rejection letter that your first novel attempt is no good, it's a failure, unheralded and unwanted.

Soulful goodbyes to college buddies after graduation, you keep up contact for a while by following their blogs, but slowly withdraw as the discouragement sets in, you have much less in common now that you've given up hope. It's a sad state the day you realize your best friend is your cat.

At least now you can see the flaws as you read over your first scripts, pathetically colourless tracts compared to prize winning fiction that you haven't the imagination or the background to produce. Your best work is shit, worse than shit, because at least with shit you can spread it around and it helps make things grow, but nothing will ever grow from your meandering apologies, so when your computer breaks down and you can't afford to fix it, it doesn't seem so terrible now, and even though your cat's hungry, still he won't eat the soup you've made for both of you from extra ketchups you stole from McDonalds, stolen like the story ideas you pilfered from your former friends' blogs, their foibles and family secrets, filched details you'd glommed onto about flutes, insulin and pretzels. Tactlessly, you appropriated their best lines, but it still didn't help, even when you adopted the popular styles of the day, slavishly mimicking sycophantic genres that you'd noticed had recently won dull competitions, glacial streams of consciousness meant to flow on interminably, but which stick in your craw like a log jam, long after you've skimmed to the end without really absorbing any of that "meaningful" bullshit about holocausts, systematic deprivation or terminally ill cancer patients.

And one night you find yourself pacing back and forth in a windowless basement suite, just like that strange, compulsive man you once met playing scrabble on the psych ward and you finally grasp after two years of wasted effort that you have nothing worthwhile to convey in a slipshod murder mystery or a cookbook, nor a children's book, nor even a treatise on women's investment. And when this

darkness seeps in, you understand now how it must have been for your father, smothered by a depression that also drowned his two brothers, as one by one they each slipped beyond help and beneath dignity. Daddy's not around any more, though you still cry when you think of him. You've finally accepted that you're no better and no worse than any singular broken down divorcee or a million wannabe writers, you're just another nutty voice, seeking self sympathy, alone in the end, and it's not even the sameness that bothers you, as much as dashed expectations and the embarrassment of pithless phrases, malapropisms and misunderstanding.

Walk through Chinatown with your cat under your arm, slipping unnoticed past the indifferent stone lion that lolls atop the south end of the Centre Street Bridge. His far away eyes linger elsewhere as you move along to the highest point above the shallow Bow River and crawl awkwardly with one arm to the top of the guard rail. Looking down you imagine the smooth, round boulders you could see at the bottom if it wasn't pitch black out, and trailing these, timeless eddies swirling clearly as the promise in a young girl's fresh face. Then you know, it's not such a long way to fall.

Nelson L. Eshleman graduated valedictorian from Fox Creek School. He finished law school at McGill University in Montreal. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Adirondack Review*, *Asia Literary Review*, *Southern Ocean Review* and *3:AM Magazine*.

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