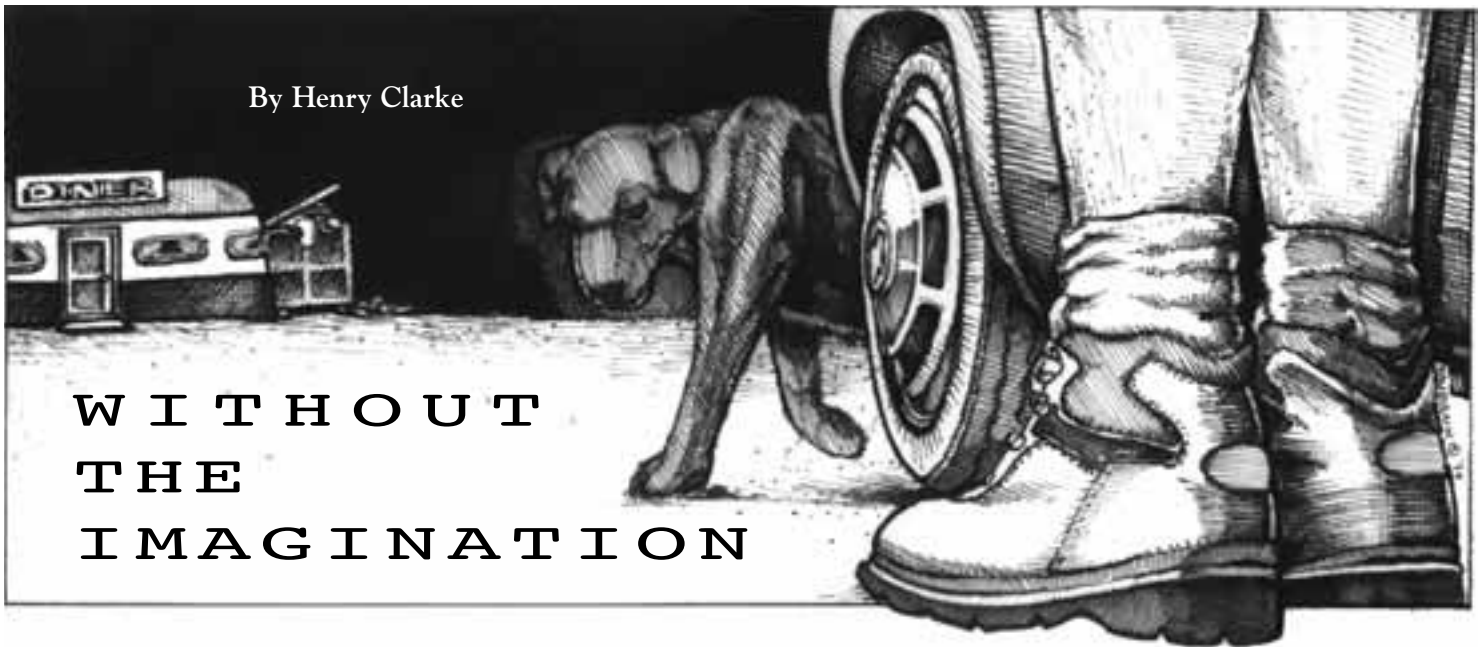


By Henry Clarke



WITHOUT THE IMAGINATION

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**I'd fantasize about
what my mother
might look like—I
was sure
she'd be pretty.**

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Henry Clarke wrote this story in tenth grade. He is now a senior at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire. He makes his home in Dobbs Ferry, New York. An honor student who is also interested in sports, he plays ice hockey and is a catcher for his school's varsity baseball team. A DJ at Exeter's radio station WPEA, he has also served as the yearbook sports editor for three years and has twice won his school's English Prize. Mr. Clarke is spending his fall term in Stratford, England, where he studies British literature and history.

Orphaned at birth, I'd grown up in the Missoula Home for Boys. I was born there, but never left with my mother. I doubt she ever saw me. I was never breast-fed; they say I accepted a bottle on the first try. I didn't even have the instincts of a regular boy.

We were not allowed to watch television at the Home (Home always emphasized by the attendants), and I'm glad. The typical television family might have overwhelmed me. I couldn't have watched Dennis Mitchell play with Mr. Wilson in suburbia while I sat unwanted, wedged in the armpit of Montana.

So my years at the Home were spent squirming in school (I completed grade twelve) and tending the small animals kept out behind the central building. I loved the dogs and goats and sheep that lolled in the back. The parents of the newborns would protect them from the wild animals and from foul weather, and once I became familiar to the animals, they would protect me also. After dark, I'd sit on the ground, patting the dogs, and they would gather around and lie near me. Once, when we heard a coyote, they all got up and circled me, their hackles raised in my defense.

When I finally left the Home at eighteen (I was the oldest resident in the Home's history), they gave me Lady, my favorite black Lab. I'd trained her from birth when I was thirteen; she was my best friend. The people at the Home said she had very fancy parents, but the owners couldn't cope with all the puppies, so they gave one to the Home. When they gave me her pedigree (not the kind of thing often found at an orphanage), I read her full name: Repentant Lady. I threw out the slip of paper and renamed her Mary.

I drove through Montana, making money wherever I could. I cut grass in Brockway, scrubbed dishes in Vandalia, and sold TVs at a Radio Shack in Polson on the edge of Flathead Lake. As I drove from job to job, Mary would lie quietly on the seat of my truck, and I'd rub her soft ears as I drove. My independence made me feel adult and mature. It also made me think of what it would be like to have a family, of how wonderful it would be to be driving home for Christmas.

Sometimes I'd see myself in the mirrors as I looked around at Montana, and I'd fantasize about what my mother looked like. I was sure she was

pretty, but not beautiful. I didn't have the dainty features that a beautiful mother dictates in her offspring. She was probably of average height, since I was just under six feet. I also knew she would be young, because orphans are usually left by young mothers. I'd look at every woman I saw and compare them to myself, hoping someday to find a match.

I liked to think of my mother as a glamorous woman, but I did not see her in Great Falls or at a ski resort. I thought I saw her once, in a town later identified to me as "the one between Cohagen and Jordan." I had a road atlas, but there was no marked town along that stretch of Montana.

The ability of the human to live on hope is incredible. Long, cold, rainy nights were made palatable by the thought of my mother. As a grade-school student can get through math class by thinking about stickball at recess, so could I get through huge spells of loneliness by imagining my mother; she, too, must have been searching.

Mary was sitting on the seat beside me when I pulled in to the small diner along the side of Route 59. She was pregnant, due any day. I'd bred her to a stud in Great Falls; I needed the money her pups would bring. I'd never had a family, so I wondered what I'd do when Mary's family appeared. Her stomach bulged under her, seeming to sweep the ground, and when she ran, her overflowing teats flapped and slapped against each other like a screen door against its frame. In the latter part of her pregnancy, Mary had become very protective of me; she wouldn't let strangers advance on me without barking and raising the fur on the back of her neck. She worried, too. She'd walk tiny circles on the seat of the truck, sniffing and exploring the same two feet of synthetic leather again and again; then she'd flop wearily down in the middle of her circle. I would just look over at her and wait for the puppies to arrive, right there in the Ford. She would lie very close to me and put her head in my lap.

The diner was disheveled. An overflowing dumpster squatted off to one side, and a decrepit row of cabins stood behind the restaurant. The curtains were orange and brown, dusty and ripped, and the coverings on the booths and counter stools inside were vinyl; bits of stuffing jutted out from the seats.

I usually looked for my mother in public places—movie theaters or restaurants. Some people showed traits that I exhibited, the same jawbone, the same rhythm of breathing, but never more than one or two parts of me would match anyone else. I knew that someday I'd find my mother, and she would just know me and we'd love each other and take care of each other.

I entered the diner through the ripped screen door,

sat down at the counter, and ordered a cup of coffee and a huckleberry muffin. The lady running the place was grotesque: huge bags hanging below her eyes, and girdled blobs of fat pushing out around her cinched apron. Canadian bacon popped on the long griddle behind her, coating the splatter-guard with grease and warm fat. A 45 spun in an old jukebox that was pushed back into the corner, its lights flickering as the bulbs wore down. The coffee was good, but the muffin was stale. It was dried out, and the berries were dispersed in a thoughtless pattern. I filled Mary's water dish from a sink in the grungy little bathroom of the diner and plodded out to the dirt parking area in front.

As I settled the water container in the dust, a little red jeep swerved into the lot, throwing dust over its outside wheels. A tall woman stepped out, her cowboy boots settling in the dirt. She was in fashionable dress: her gripping jeans tucked into the boots, and a denim shirt tied at the bottom, exposing her navel. Her flat chest and straight hips were hardly feminine, but her face was attractive, blue eyes like my own dominating her other features. I guessed she was about thirty-five. She looked more wealthy than anyone else in that part of Montana. The jeep was clean and in good condition. She dressed in the current style.

I followed her back into the diner. Her features were similar to my own, and I imagined that her picture in my fictional living room would not look out of place.

She sat at the counter but ordered nothing. The

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fat woman passed her a good morning and set a cup of black coffee beside her. Her hips expanded over the small round stool as she rolled to one side to reach the cup. She picked her boots up from the footrest under the counter and crossed her legs. She sat elegantly, but her dusty face defeated her clothes in their attempt at an image that was greater than she could support. She wasn't royalty, but she held herself as if she were. Her chin paralleled the counter, pointing her eyes at the wall over the skillet. Her ears twitched a little when she blinked.

Her body fit the picture of my mother that I had constructed over my lifetime. Her features were very similar to mine, and any father could make up for the

differences. I stared at her for a long time. She sat as I did, and when she spoke to the cook, her sweet voice had the same tone as mine.

She could have raised me in a little ranch house, riding horses and living together for years. She could have loved me all my life, never regretting her decision to keep me. Instead, I had been discarded at birth.



KRISTEN GRICUS, TWELFTH GRADE,
SCHOOL ONE, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

But that could be forgiven. I could forget all that and take her now with any past we chose. She was a perfect match. All her features matched my own, her hair, her cheeks, her eyes.

It is amazing that I was still letting my mind race into fantasies of a family and of a mother. After almost

twenty years of being an orphan, I should have hardened myself against the hope of ever finding her. I knew she would never simply announce herself at the Missoula Home for Boys and whisk me away. I knew as well as I knew my times tables that she would not drive up and take me to a farm and raise me in the Corn Belt. But a human body does not allow its user to abandon hope. Hope fuels the body, a hope that better times and a better life are on the way, maybe just a day away.

I knew this woman was my mother after a few moments of studying her, but then she did something that convinced me so much I was ready to introduce myself.

My mother looked deliberately at me and said, flat in tone, with no emotion, "It's so nice that the sun's out today."

I said nothing. I could say nothing. She knew I was her son. I had found my mother after agonizing years of hope and grievance. She wanted me back. She hadn't wanted to give me up—she'd been forced to—and wonderful fate had brought us to the same point on this day of our separate quests.

A Volkswagen sputtered into the lot, and my mother looked away from me and stood up stiffly. She walked past me to the door. She greeted the man who got out of the car with a kiss on the cheek. He was disgusting; his skin was pale and ruddy, and his business suit was grimy and of an unpleasant cut. He was very thin, and his thick beard made his head appear too heavy

for the rest of him. His inflated head made me wonder if he ever had to prop it up to keep it from tumbling off and rolling down his horrid suit.

The two walked to one of the dilapidated cabins behind the diner and quickly went in. I followed and stopped just around the corner. They drew the blinds hurriedly and locked the door. I watched intently for half an hour, then saw them come back out. The man had forgotten to put his tie back on, and the woman's hair hung down out of its style. Her shirt was untied, and not buttoned far enough up to hide her tiny breasts. The man lunged at her breasts with his face, and she pushed them toward him. He gave her a wad of bills and walked to the front of the diner. He opened the door to his shabby compact and plopped in. The car popped away down Route 59.

She entered the back of the diner through a small plywood door and tiny hall that led her behind the counter. I looked in to the building through the ripped curtains and saw my mother give some of the bills to the old woman behind the counter. They laughed as my mother tied her hair back out of her face.

I stared at the small cabin where my mother had offended me so many times. I was starting for the truck when I heard Mary yelp from somewhere in the bushes. She had been loose in the lot since my mother drove up, and had wandered off behind the dumpster. I called to her, but she only barked back from the same place. I crashed into the bushes and found her beneath a berry bush, kindly licking clean her pups. There were four, all black. Their fur was slicked back like a teenager's in the Fifties, their eyes closed like frightened children's in a spookhouse. Mary stood up to greet me and revealed one dead pup, crushed by the weight of its mother.

I gathered up the living puppies and put the dead one in the dumpster. I thought that Mary might get

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upset, so I let her watch me, but she didn't care about the dead one; it was no longer her responsibility. I put them in my coat on the seat of the truck. Mary wallowed into the truck, the pain and effort of delivery still with her. She licked them all again, and then allowed them to feed from her abundant supply of breast milk.

Pulling out of the diner, I (continued on page 33)



Afterwords

This department welcomes your comments on the literature published in Merlyn's Pen. Contributions may be of any length (up to one thousand words) and in any style: reactions quickly penned after reading a story, thoughts about the content or form of a published work, even expository essays.

Send to: Afterwords, Merlyn's Pen: The National Magazines of Student Writing, P.O. Box 1058, East Greenwich, RI 02818. Use the submission guidelines and cover sheet on page 5.

How You Feel

By James Stegall (Dec./Jan. 1994)

I found this to be a profound and unusual love story, true to the lives of teenagers. It showed the real feelings involved in teen relationships—confusion, fear, heartbreak, not knowing, and feeling you're in love though you don't really know what love is.

Most love stories leave me with a feeling of depression and loneliness; "How You Feel" left me feeling satisfied and engulfed in a captivating feeling of warmth that hugged my body and left me feeling whole and loved.

—Bethany Hargis,
Tenth grade, DeLand High School,
DeLand, Florida

James Stegall's wonderful story, "How You Feel," is a thought-provoking picture of youth. Many kids go through hard breakups during their high-school years, and the emotions produced are sometimes devastating. Stegall does an elegant job of showing adolescent feelings as he paints a beautiful emotional picture. I think many of the students who read the story will automatically relate to this universal theme. His wonderful writing and in-depth delving into the teenage psyche are most memo-

orable. Stegall lets you know so much about the main character in such a short space that it feels as if you've known him forever.

—Robert Hedengren,
Twelfth grade, DeLand High School,
DeLand, Florida

"How You Feel" struck my interest within the first paragraph. It was like falling in love at first sight. It seemed so real to me! This story was so deep that I felt like I was right there on the scene as the action unfolded.

It also answered a lot of my questions as to why relationships between teenagers tend to break off so easily. The story made me realize that guys are just as afraid of the commitment of falling in love as girls are.

I really enjoyed this story, and so did my classmates. It was chosen number one by my friends.

—Billi Sue Carwile,
Tenth grade, DeLand High School,
DeLand, Florida

Without the Imagination (continued from page 12)

let my mind go black. I stared at the white line on the side of the road, not seeing anything of Montana as it rushed by me. I put a horse blanket over Mary and her pups and tried desperately to keep them within its warmth, but they always squirmed their way out.

Every time I saw myself in the mirror I became enraged. I'd pound on the wheel of the truck, scaring Mary and her puppies. Sometimes I would thrash myself into tears, then collapse, drooping over the wheel and cursing my taunting reflection as it looked at me from the windshield. I could see my mother everywhere.

I ran deeper into the state, my eyes fixed on the broken white line, my gas gauge slowly winding down. I ran out of gas climbing a huge deserted mountain, my foot heavy on the accelerator. I gripped the wheel of the truck for a long time, just staring at the white line and concentrating on the road ahead of me. Hoping that the truck would have a sudden surge of power and travel on its own, or that I would be rescued . . .

As the sun began its descent behind the mountain, I eased out of my position in the cockpit and put my back against the seat. My fingers were cramped from hours of strangling the steering wheel, and my right leg was tingly numb. Lying down on the seat, I put my head on the edge of the blanket, curled up against Mary and her sleeping babies, and sobbed. ★



YVONNE CHARAPATA, TWELFTH GRADE,
LOMIRA HIGH SCHOOL, LOMIRA, WISCONSIN