Journal for Mrs. Rotburg’s Class
by Ray Newby

8/22 Do Not Read

Today we are supposed to write about the best day of our life for English. I don’t want to. You said you wouldn't read these if we asked you not to at the beginning. So, I guess don’t read this.

Everyone else is writing and some people have their heads down. If you are not reading this, then I guess I could write about whatever I want. I shouldn’t curse, because I’m sure you’ll skim over it. Maybe you’ll read it anyways, but I asked you not to, so I suppose you couldn’t say anything unless I said something ridiculous like I was going to kill myself next month or my mom beats me every night.

I guess the best day of my life was when I went to the fair in Virginia with my dad. The fair just started getting popular with other kids this year because some of them like to kiss each other on the Ferris wheel, but I’ve been going a long time. My first memory was at that fair when I ate part of a crab cake and spit it out in a trash can because I didn’t like it. And my mom yelled at me because crabs were expensive. That wasn’t the best day of my life though because that day was later. I think I was nine. My dad spent all the money he had with him trying to win me the prize at the stand where you catch rubber fish with a little hook, and they let you trade them in for prizes. My dad could only catch the little ones, never the big one, but after we went home he told me he loved me. Which was the first time he said that and I cried.

You said in a few days we are going to have to expand one of these into an essay but I am only doing this entry because you are looking at me and tapping your temple with a pen.

8/23 Do Not Read

Today we have to write about the worst day of our life, which I think is inappropriate for a classroom. Maybe some kids’ worst days are normal and shareable, like when their dog or grandfather died. Do not read this one.

I don’t think I should have to write about this, but since you think I should the worst day of my life was the day I was admitted to the hospital, which was eleven months, two weeks and four days ago. You already know about it, so I do not know why I have to explain it out in detail which you said is a “narrative style” you want us to try out. That makes no sense because all stories have detail and any without are just boring.

Another worst day of my life was the day my dad died, which no one else has had to deal with in this class I know. I have been in class with almost the same people since second grade and all of their fathers came in last year for job day, which was a bullshit day because we were in sixth grade last year and legally couldn’t get jobs and still can’t. Sometimes I feel like you don’t think.

I really hope you do not read this. And if you do I am sorry. I’m sure you do think, maybe.

8/24 Do Not Read

I really don’t think you are reading these since everyone is talking about how you had an argument with Mr. Nick yesterday about whether or not it is safe to let us keep private journals and you seemed like you really cared that we “had a safe place to talk” which sounds like code for “unofficial self-therapy,” which is what my mom called the journal she bought me last year.
In that journal though all I do is write the lyrics to songs I hear on the radio as I listen, which is harder than it sounds for most songs because the singers can talk really fast, or I guess not talk but sing. I used to try to copy down the news but I was worried my mom would see words like “murder” jump out if she opened it. Also, hearing about stabbing made me want to wash my hands, even though I wasn’t the one who did it.

Today you are giving us a whole period to write which I like even though I really didn’t want to do these journals when we started before. We are supposed to be writing about who we would vote for in the upcoming election but I don’t know. My mom is voting for the Republicans because she thinks we need less taxes, which makes sense because she doesn’t make a lot of money and if there were no taxes she could make more. Which is how it was when I was little and my dad worked, before he got fired. He used to make stuffing and turkey all the time and we didn’t have to wait for Thanksgiving.

What about you, Mrs Rotburg? I guess you won’t say because you respect our privacy and won’t read this. You wear a lot of silver but so does my mom, only her necklaces make her skin look green if she wears it too much. I think you probably have enough money, because when your husband came in last year for the jobs assembly he said he worked for the government, which is who my mom pays taxes to.

We still have a lot of time to write but I don’t know anything about politics. I want to ask you if we are allowed to use the computer to look up stuff about politics but I know you won’t let me because I am not allowed to go to the computer lab by myself because of last year. Not even when I want to look up things about the Republicans my mom is voting for.

Sometimes when I ask my mom why something is she just shakes her head and says “politics.” Like last year when they put me in the Special Ed classes. They took me out this year, but that is because my mom did what she calls “pulled some strings.” Pulling strings is when you manipulate people but legally.

Could you ask your husband if my mom can stop paying so many taxes? I guess you won’t ask him because you aren’t reading this. And I know it doesn’t work like that.

8/25 Do Not Read

I didn’t do my journal in class today so I am writing it at home. The journal we were supposed to write was about our favorite things. We were supposed to write about our favorite holiday and our favorite season and our favorite books. I guess you probably could read this entry but still don’t.

My favorite holiday is my birthday because I like getting older and farther away from what my mom calls “the history.” I like getting presents too. My favorite season is winter because it’s cold and the cold kills bacteria so there’s less to stress about. In the summer germs crawl all over your hands and up your nose while you sleep. My favorite book is probably the one I read in the hospital called Charlotte’s Web.

The song on the radio right now is really good and I’ve never heard it before. I will write down my actions I guess. Right now I am writing this at my kitchen table. I am also eating ravioli out of a can. After I write half a page I am going to go to my room and sleep until my mom gets home. And then we can talk about our days while she cleans up and pays bills and taxes. It is Thursday and the man who takes the money didn’t come yesterday so I guess he will be here today.
8/26 Do Not Read

I forgot to do my journal today in class again but that was because I had to use the bathroom really bad, but I’m not allowed to go to the bathroom during class without a teacher. So I guess I didn’t really forget. I just couldn’t concentrate, and since we didn’t have a prompt today since it is “Free Write Friday,” I couldn’t think of what to write about.

I thought of something now though, and since I don’t have a limited time I can write about it a lot, which I want to do because now I am very sure Mrs. Rotburg is not reading these journals.

Tomorrow is my dad’s birthday, and I would like to tell you all of the gifts I have given him because I liked them all very much. He always called them “creative” and usually kept them. The first one I remember was in second grade when I made him a cut out hand-turkey which I glued real polyester feathers to. That gift isn’t very good but I was only in second grade so it’s okay. In third grade I paper-mached a Valentine's Day candy box in the shape of a heart and painted his name on it. In fourth grade I drew him a picture with the crayons my teacher brought in that were encased in plastic and you could screw the bottom up to write with them. I drew him a picture of the crayons because I knew he liked cool inventions because his job was inventing things. In fifth grade I made him a bunch of paper snowflakes because he likes the winter even though his birthday is in August. My mom hung them up and made soup like it was cold outside but he never came but that was okay. In sixth grade I made a frame out of pipe cleaners my mom shoplifted from Michael’s. Shoplifted is a fancy word for theft, even though it wasn’t really stealing, she explained, because they were for someone else. This year I didn’t make him anything because he was dead but my mom and I did pick flowers which was okay.

8/29 Do Not Read (Anybody)

My mom saw my journal over the weekend and said I was writing about things that were inappropriate which I don’t think is true so now I have to add Anybody in parenthesis so no one reads. She did that last year too even though she said I could write about anything in the journal she bought me. This is called censorship, which is something the government can’t do so I don’t think my mom can either.

Today we are extending one of our old journal entries. I told my therapist about the journal and she thinks I should extend the one about the hospital and write about my feelings, which is basically what she always tries to get me to do.

We are supposed to be writing these as if other people are reading them though, which I do not want to happen because only a few people know about me being in the hospital last year and that is already too many. I don’t like it when people know about my personal business which is why I did not like the hospital. The nurse always came into my room at night while I was asleep and went through my stuff and took what I kept from the common room. I tried to stay awake all night but I always ended up falling asleep when they were checking on me because I closed my eyes to pretend. Only when you are very tired, I guess closing your eyes makes you fall asleep right away. Even if you don’t want to.

8/30 Do Not Read (Anybody)

Yesterday I hit my fists on the chalkboard and pushed over Jimmy Greg’s desk on him when Mrs. Rotburg made me stand in front of the class. This is because she wanted me to read what I wrote to the class yesterday. She sent me to Principal Keeling’s office where I have to stay all day today because my mom is pulling more strings so I don’t have to do the project at all.
When she came in to get me she was crying, and she told Mr. Keeling that she was sorry, and he said “remember our agreement,” which she wouldn’t explain to me even though I asked her 63 times on the way home. I could have asked her more times only I could tell she was getting mad. And sometimes when she’s mad she drives really fast, and I was sitting in the front seat so if we were in a car accident I would probably get hurt like my dad.

This is supposed to be a half page but I’ve had a long day and my mom is pulling strings so I don’t have to do it anymore, anyways.

8/31 Do Not Read (Anybody)

I guess I don't have to do this anymore. Mrs Rotburg gave me a new math book to work on instead, but I like writing in here. So I am going to make up topics to write about while I’m supposed to be doing my math book.

Our tax collector came over today and scared what my mom calls “the shit” out of me. Mrs. Rotburg, if you’re reading this, I am quoting my mom, so those are not my words and you can’t yell at me. I went to open the door but I looked through the peephole first, which is a good thing because it wasn’t the usual tax collector. It was Mr. Keeling, except he wasn’t wearing a suit and tie like he does at school. And he had a big dog on a leash which I had to look out the window to see clearly and wave at. Only when I waved at the dog Mr. Keeling thought I was waving at him and he started to look really nervous. He kept ringing the doorbell and trying to talk to me but I’m not supposed to open the door except for the normal tax collector so instead I washed my hands with the gross soap my mom bought that smells like alcohol, and not mint or fruit like I like. My mom came home ten minutes later and started yelling at me because I didn’t let him in and because I was scrubbing my shins with a Brillo pad.

9/1 Do Not Read (Anybody)

Today it has been one year (365 days) since I was in the hospital and my therapist wants me to write about it. I think my mom must have told her about it at some point because I never did but she knows a lot about it and asks me questions all the time. My mom made me chocolate chip pancakes this morning and said I could take two showers today. She also said how I shouldn’t believe in anniversaries because all it means is that the weather was the same last year on this day. But the last bit of sun I saw before they locked me up was blocked by rain clouds, while today the forecast is 83 F and sunny with winds from the west, according to Weather.com/Albuquerque.

Mr. Keeling came over again today only he didn’t bring his dog, which was disappointing because yesterday the dog let me look at it and I kicked its ball around the yard so it would chase it. I’ve never had a dog which is probably good because most pets have to come inside like our old cat Zusha, and she got hair everywhere, even in my soup one time. My dad hated her because she threw up a lot and it was always in his closet. The last time any of us saw her was when he let her out of the house while he was smoking a cigar because she puked in his shoes.

Mr. Keeling’s dog is a big brown kind with stubby ears and tail. I asked Mr. Keeling why he didn’t bring it to school anytime and he slammed the door and went to his car. My mom followed him outside and I saw our old tax collector waiting in a blue car. He got out and all three of them started arguing until the dog started pooping on the yard and my mom kicked the blue car’s tires. Mr. Keeling and the old tax man left with the dog which they put in the backseat.
After my mom came in, she locked herself in her room. I knocked on her door and she just said, “Sometimes I wish you'd gone off that road with your father,” which is weird because the pancakes she made me were still on the counter.

9/2 Do Not Read (Anybody)
I remember a while ago when my dad was still alive, and my mom still loved him, they would go down to the lake in the county over and leave me with a babysitter for the day. One time, about two hours after they left, a taxi pulled into our driveway and my mom got out. She was soaking wet except for the top of her head, which made her look like she had two colors in her hair. A while later my dad came home with a bottle and flowers and kept knocking on their bedroom door. She didn't tell me what happened but he always bought her flowers after he hurt her.

I told my mom I've been scrubbing again. Her cry is really overwhelming, too, because it sounds like the music they play right before the first actor gets killed in a horror movie. Or the sound our car makes when the accelerator gets stuck to the floor. And Mr. Keeling makes it worse. He came here before school and screamed at my mom because she hasn’t been paying him taxes. And my mom didn't let me go to school today, even though I've been waiting all week to wear my favorite shoes. It doesn’t matter. No one is going to look at them, because I am just the kid that went to the hospital last year, who can’t wash his hands right.

9/3 Do Not Read (Anybody)
I almost didn't write in this today because in elementary school kids who did extra homework were called try-hards and today is Saturday. Only I don't think this is homework since Mrs. Rotburg said I don't have to do it anymore. So now it is a hobby.

My mom left last night right after I finished writing, and she didn't come back until after I went to sleep. I know she was here because she left milk and thirty dollars on the table, which means she probably won't be back until Monday afternoon. Which is okay, I guess. Only I'm remembering why I had to go to the hospital last year.

Another thing that happened this morning was that I found a box in the hallway closet full of my birthday gifts to my dad. I almost threw away the hand turkey because it was really embarrassing but I didn't because I was feeling nostalgic about it. Sometimes when I'm remembering something I lie on the floor with my hands around my head and try to breathe really slow so it's like I'm dreaming. I don't do it very often anymore because there are lots of germs on people's feet and that is where they walk, but today I did it right there in the hallway and tried to remember my dad’s voice. I did this mostly because I felt like I needed to wash my hands only the last time I did this morning they were bleeding really bad and I don't want to get an infection. So I laid there for a long time until I remembered the time at the fair, when he was tucking me in with all of my new toys he won me at the fishing game. And he said, “I know I don't say this a lot, but you are my son.” And he started to leave, but he turned around. “You're my son. And I love my family.” He said that and then closed the door, which I snuck back up to open because I didn't have a nightlight. And because later I knew I'd hear him laugh as he watched late night TV.

After I was done feeling nostalgic I called my mom's cell phone but she didn't pick up. And now I keep calling her, hitting the redial button with my right hand and then continuing to write with my left. I’m breathing very hard, like I just ran the mile in gym.
I can’t stop hearing my dad’s laughter. And I don’t know what my hands will do if I don’t keep them both busy.

9/20
I don’t remember a lot of my last essay because I was on what my new doctor calls “endorphins,” which is the science word for having a nervous breakdown. Last year when I was in the hospital was nothing like this time because this year I stayed in the ER wing and they didn’t transfer me to the mental hospital where I was. After I finished writing I washed my hands more only I used steel wool because I thought I had an infection. Only I made it worse I guess because I had to get twelve little stitches that night, in different places which actually hurt more than scrubbing.

After I was in the hospital for a few days and was stable enough that my mom stopped crying every time she saw me she started telling me more about Mr. Keeling. He said I can stay at my school, mostly because the police told him he had to, because my mom told them about all the taxes she was paying to let me stay. It turns out Principal Keeling was doing the illegal kind of manipulating my mom called “blackmail,” and next month we get to go to court to see him, only my mom might get in trouble too if we don’t have a “sympathetic jury.” The day she told me that was the same day I got my stitches out too, which made it one of my best days in a while because they also didn’t have to give me any drugs to calm me down after that.

Anyways, today is my first day back which is why I haven’t written in a while. My mom let me get Burger King and bought me wet wipes I can use for a little while instead of washing my hands. The wipes only kill 99% of germs, but my mom says the other 1% are good germs, which I don’t think I believe. But I haven’t scrubbed.

I also got to buy a new journal to write in everyday that I don’t have to show anyone like I do at school. It has a dog on the front. I am going to write in there now and use this one as a keepsake in case I get bad again. And I can read this and remember how sad I was and how scrubbing didn’t help. My mom took a picture on her old Polaroid of my hands too before they took out my stitches. It made me sad to see when she showed me today but I guess that’s good in a way.

9/20 (again)
And one other thing. We finally got my dad’s headstone engraved today. My mom sent it in to get done while I was in the hospital. It has his name, a couple of dates, and an engraving of my hand-turkey.