

The Oval

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 7

2010

The Best Policy

Bryanny Froehlich

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Froehlich, Bryanny (2010) "The Best Policy," *The Oval*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol3/iss1/7>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oval by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

THE BEST POLICY

My fifteenth birthday happens near the start of our last twenty days in the wild. It is June 7th, 1996. I have been in treatment for about four months. I wake early in the arid dust of the C. M. Russell Wildlife Refuge, before the sun has broken the canyon, but after the dawn has spilled purple light across the huge bat-cave cottonwoods we camped under. I unzip the mosquito net over my sleeping bag and wonder if it is 5:19; the exact time that I was born, the official start of the celebration of me. As I am born from my bedding it surprises me that, even though I spent my last birthday in the Missoula County Jail, I have never felt so alone or unloved. My family and friends are hundreds of miles away, and I trust no one. And it very well could be all my fault. It depends on who you talk to.

Montana Youth Alternatives is a program similar to Outward Bound with one major difference: staff members are the only willing participants. The State of Montana Youth Justice Department decides who is eligible and no one's parents can just send them there by agreeing to foot the bill. It is a new form of treatment for juvenile delinquents with high potential for rehabilitation. Groups of eight or nine youths are sent out into the wilderness of Montana with (in the first twenty days) rudimentary supplies; a blue tarp and nylon string magically become a backpack with the addition of a length of seat belt strap. Eight staff members work with us for sixty days. Thirty to sixty days of orientation precede the wilderness "experience," followed by sixty days of residential treatment.

We are the tenth group dropped out in the wilderness surrounding Helena and, later, northeastern Montana. There are seven boys and one other girl besides myself and our ages range from fourteen to nineteen. Each day we must drink two to four quarts of water that we capture from creeks and ponds and treat with aerobic oxygen to kill microbes. We will hike over two hundred miles in two months. We eat grains, lentils, potato flakes, ramen, canned tomatoes, and only on Wednesdays when the staff changes, meat. We are allowed to gather food as long as we share. We kill a rattlesnake with a rock by the Missouri River Breaks, and we all agree that, on the poultry scale, it tastes like grouse or pheasant but definitely not chicken. We will be subjected to countless trust-building exercises that, if anything, highlight our distrust, with the exception that the group trusts me to evenly distribute the week's ration of brown sugar. I ration it fairly because I eat the chunks that I can't break apart. If one person

breaks a rule, everyone is held accountable. The herd mentality descends; I become part of a “we” and it is not pleasant.

The staff and the others are sleeping, breathing and farting peacefully for the only part of the day. My bladder hears the river in the distance. I weigh the need to pee against the likelihood of getting caught missing if the staff awakes, combined with the probability of rattlesnakes, given my lack of footwear. They take our boots before we go to bed at night and one staff member sleeps with them in his or her pup-tent so we are less likely to escape. My bowels loosen and make up my mind: I’m going. Snakes and bare feet be damned. I quickly walk fifty big steps south of camp and dig a hole in the chalky dirt with my hands. When I can fit my arm in the hole to my elbow I commence my business. My guts twist and squirm. I may have contracted a parasite from the water as I’ve been sick for days, but I’m starting to feel better. I lower my head to my knees, crying and choking on the oily infected waste smell. I try to tell myself that being in this place is a consequence of my actions, but I wonder, is it really? I have forgotten my allotment of toilet paper and wonder what I could do to be less stupid and more prepared.

I return unseen to a still camp and quietly break my area for the day. In order to eat and move on for the day, we are all required to journal at least a paragraph in half-sized notebooks each morning. The staff initial and date each entry; they are supposed to read them, but I doubt they do. I test this theory by peppering my entries with swears and haven’t been punished. I also write how I really feel, but I get the sense that the truth doesn’t matter. I write about the sunrise and birthdays and being so fucking lonely. Before I can finish the entry, my ass cheeks clench and I wish a counselor were awake so I could ask permission to get the shovel. I don’t wish hard enough to wake one though; this stillness is the best birthday present.

On the Wednesday after my birthday the staff exchange brings surprises. For the group: kielbasa rings that shine with fat and Hershey bars for each of us. For me: a gigantic crème-filled birthday doughnut, big as a cake and covered in chocolate frosting, accompanied by a cup to provide a stool sample. I have to share the pastry and the microbe count of my digestive system. I also receive two gifts that I do not have to share. A counselor named Nancy gives me a box of instant cocoa packets and a bookmark with painted wild roses because they are the flower of June. I thank her and get permission to go to the bathroom. I don’t have to go, but it’s the only

way to obtain a private moment. The notion of the bookmark reminds me of my mother, but I know that I am homesick for a home that is idealized by this time and place. I dig a hole in case the staff comes to check on me and I sit next to it and cry quietly.

Almost three months later it is August. I graduate the program and return to Missoula, Montana to live at the Talbot Center group home. They can't say when I will be able to go home, just that I have to be honest and work the program and we'll see. Up to nine other kids live at the Talbot: five girls and five boys maximum. We are placed on different levels of the house according to sex; girls have rooms upstairs and boys on the lower level with living room, kitchen, and staff office on the main floor. At least two counselors are at work during the active hours of the day. I am expected to do chores, be hygienic, and attend school in addition to group, family, and personal counseling. I must eat all meals served in the home and do three cardiovascular exercises each week. My performance in these areas determines such things as my bedtime, phone privileges, free time, family visitation, and ultimately my freedom.

For weeks I ask for permission to do anything outside of the staff's line of sight. I ask to go to the bathroom or to get a drink of water and they laugh. They laugh and tell me that I only have to ask to go outside. I am humiliated by this, but it frees me from the herd mentality. I do not appreciate it. I feel like kindling split from a new log: independent and fragile, as if too much desire for warmth will use me up.

I must choose a staff member to be my lead counselor, so I pick the only counselor I know from before I was incarcerated. Her name is Melissa and we have known each other since my first removal from my home at age twelve. I can trust her because I don't have to summarize my past and she has never doubted my word. Melissa is my friend and that is a precious comfort in this new wilderness where I must own the problems alone. I tell her all the things I would tell my mother if my mother *wasn't* my mother.

I have problems resuming school. MYA isn't accredited yet, so the credits I had made up in residential don't apply to my transcript. Hiking two hundred miles makes up for freshman P. E. so I start out my sophomore year as a freshman taking tenth grade P. E. and doubling everything else. School seems hopeless, so I skip classes and smoke pot. I am on parole when I just want to make out with my girlfriend and read books while I smoke cigarettes. I

want to know when I can go home and that I am not doomed to the life of a criminal. I don't know how to achieve these goals. I can

barely express them to the required people.

In October, I find out from an article in the *Missoulian* that my father has been arrested for an incident involving the sexual abuse of a retarded woman. All day long at school my teachers and friends ask odd questions about some Froehlich guy in the paper and look at me with pity. When I see my shrink after school he tells me not to read the paper. I find the Talbot copy of the paper as soon as I arrive "home" that afternoon. The article is about his trial and the guilty verdict. He is going back to prison and I am glad that my mother divorced him. However, I wonder what his behavior says about me and I hate the pitiful expressions that follow me around for days at school. I fail two pee tests and my parole officer removes his Stetson to tell me that one more positive earns me a trip to Texas Girls Prison where they fuck little blond hippy girls with curling irons that are plugged in and hot. Same if I'm caught truant. His troubled doe eyes say that he's for real on this. He talks around a wad of Skoal and spits in the trashcan next to his desk as if to illustrate the point that it's that simple. Simple as gravity.

Mostly out of fear, I manage to compose a dull pulse of progress to all outward perception. The pee tests are clean and I make the honor roll at Hellgate for the first half of the year. The only manifestation of my discontent that I can't hide is consistent and escalating insomnia. When the staff notices, I placate them by admitting to Melissa that I am terrified of the dark and it would help if she would maybe read to me before bed on the nights that she worked. It is a half-truth that leads to a half-solution. I can only sleep sometimes and when I do it's four or five hours and I wake up panicking for reasons I can't articulate. I dream black nightmares where I live out the events I am afraid to talk about.

I fake the happy face so well that I earn a two night home pass for Christmas. I have made it clear to anyone who asks that the only thing I want for Christmas is an acoustic guitar with steel strings. This wish comes with a guarantee of not wanting any presents for my sixteenth birthday. Even though I don't say it in so many words, a guitar is my one true desire. It is the reward I envision for all the hoop-jumping of the past year. I can barely admit it to myself, but I secretly imagine that it is the key to finding all the right words.

A guitar shaped package wrapped in black paper printed with planets and comets appears under my family's tree the weekend visit before Christmas. My younger brother and sister are prize pupils in my school of concealed gift identification and they can't understand why I won't play the game with that particular package. They think it is hilarious and they both know what is really under the wrapping. My brother Zach pretends to examine the gift and concludes that it is a guitar case full of macaroni. He rolls around on the carpet, clutching his stomach with laughter. My sister Jasmine agrees that it is in fact a guitar case, but it is full of rocks or coal. They both choke on the giggles that result. I tell them that they are both wrong; it is a bass shaped bag full of giraffe poop. I do my best to change the subject by presenting the Snickers eggs I brought them. Normally, I would have shown them how to know that it was really a guitar with a series of shakes, taps, and listenings. It wouldn't have been hard. Their jokes were just too close to what I expected for opening up my big mouth and letting the truth out; a big fat slap in the face to show me what I got wrong in calculating what I deserved.

On Christmas morning the valley wakes to three feet of snow that dumped down overnight. I get up before dawn and the dead yellow grass of Christmas Eve has been erased by pure sparkling blue-whiteness. I sneak out on the roof for a smoke. I can't tell where my breath starts and the smoke stops. This is the physical truth and the emotional truth and it depresses me for a bit but the suddenness and the purity of the snow are almost enough to make me believe in miracles. When I go back in, it is time to find our stockings because my siblings heard the slight sounds of my wakefulness and woke our mother. I dodge confrontation by retreating to the kitchen where I start the coffee and hurry to brush my teeth before my mom can smell cigarettes on me.

We kids dissect our stockings and open our presents, stopping only to say thank you. I save the guitar shaped package for last; not just my last, but the last of all the presents. As if it is an important letter that I want someone else to open and read for me. My mother asks me why I haven't opened the biggest of all the presents. She smiles and asks me if I don't know that it's for me. I want to ask her if she thinks I'm retarded or something, but I ask her what happens if it's not a guitar. Tears grease my eyes when the only answer is her laughter.

It is the day before spring break starts. I haven't slept for six nights in a row. Upon my request, Melissa reads me my favorite

kid's book, *Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine*. The moral of the story is to not lie. I want to tell her that I can't go on like this, not sleeping. I want to tell her that I only shaved my legs today so I could have a good excuse to pry a blade off of the LadyBic Twin that is kept in the staff office. But I don't know how to do it without extending my already indefinite confinement. She is my friend and I know that to omit the truth is a kind of lie. My thoughts are verbally reduced to sentences a child could compose. She finishes the story and says goodnight. "I am afraid," is all I can say. She pats my head and says that everything will be okay. She shuts off the lamp by my bed and leaves. For a few minutes I believe that everything *will* be okay.

I retrieve the slim razor blade from between my mattress and box spring. It looks harmless, tiny and angled to fit on a pink plastic handle, but it has already sliced into the callused parts of the fingers I use to hold it. I open the journal on my nightstand and use the pen that came with it to write: *I obviously don't care, so why should you. Sleep well.* I don't sign my name or date it. I leave the journal open on my nightstand and take a deep breath, not knowing that this will be far easier than I could ever imagine.

I sit on the edge of my bed by the closed door and slit my wrists both the wrong way and the right; horizontal and vertical. Because I'm right handed, I make the mistake of starting on the left. My left hand is numb and slippery when I start on the right wrist and it is hard to keep a grip on the small blade. I mangle the delicate skin with several clumsy cuts that I assume are superficial and end up doing much more damage than is necessary. The blade is deceptively keen and at first the wounds are merely whiter partings of flesh. Red dots appear inside the slashes and swell into a stream of blood. I watch as the fish-belly white of my forearms is overtaken by crimson. I am dumbfounded by the sheer volume of blood pulsing out of me. My lips tingle and a drop of spit falls from my open mouth onto my right forearm momentarily revealing the whitish skin like the blink of an eye.

I wrap my arms around my belly and lay back on the piled blankets. Every sense is extra sharp and in focus. Not only the smeary roughness of the ceiling or the sound of bugs bumping against my window screen or the wet smell of spring, but also the fact that I *am* afraid. I find the truth for a moment but when I try to get up to write it down, I collapse onto the full laundry basket at the foot of my bed. This is happening way too fast and I'm not sure anymore that death is what I really want.

I move my arms away from my body trying to get up. Blood has bloomed up to my breasts on the white t-shirt I sleep in. A broad red cummerbund covers the lower half of my shirt and the waistband of my jammie-pants. My stomach and ribs are sticky. Redness is invested in the creases of my inner elbows and the wrinkles of my palms and fingerprints. The blood on my thumbnails is starting to dry in a series of rusty overlapping crescents. The extreme contrast of red-brown on the bluing nail beds brings a new sense of urgency. I want to live.

It is a long hard shuffle to the living room where I can hear the staff scratching their nightly progress reports. I lean against the wall and sort of float down the stairs leaving a trail of bloody smears on the wall behind me and droplets on the carpet. Everything here is beige and I feel worse for the mess. Melissa is writing in a progress file. Her long body is draped over the tan recliner that faces the stairs. She is thinking hard. I reel like a teenaged drunk and my right wrist burns where I nicked the tendon, but the pain is a far off echo tethered to the body I am starting to leave behind. I am exhausted by the time I reach the bottom step. I stop and listen to my pulse pound between my ears; it is the sound of a river in full runoff.

I let my head fall against the wall and it thumps softly, but loud enough to rupture Melissa's concentration. Her blue eyes are wide to begin with but they grow in confusion and then again in bewilderment. It seems like they will spill right out of her face if they get any larger. I turn my palms outward at my sides, like the painting of dead Jesus after the crucifixion in my children's picture bible. All at once Melissa is inches from my face, hands on my shoulders asking, "Oh Bry! Oh what have you done?" My lips buzz and I grope at the numb recess of my mind for a passable answer.

The other counselor, Dan, is an EMT. Without being told he glides from the office with two rolls of thick gauze. They resemble furry rolls of toilet paper and he uses them to bind tourniquet dressings on my wrists while we wait for the ambulance that he called. I still search for an answer. I want to tell them that I am so tired and so scared and so lonesome and I made a horrible mistake and I want help. I want help so badly and I wish I could ask for it but all this hurts more than any wound. My heart aches like an abscessed molar and I can't tell them because they might confirm that it is ALL MY FAULT. It probably is. These thoughts surface and submerge in disjointed waves. I hear a thin siren wailing. Splashes of red and white light cast odd shadows into the living room. I manage to whisper, "don't leave" to

Melissa. And she doesn't, until they tell her she has to.

If you are a teen or adult who fails at suicide in Missoula County, you usually end up in the Providence Center. The Prov is also the way station to Montana's State Mental Hospital at Warm Springs, so there is a vast variety of crazy there at any given time. Everyone I know knows someone who's been in the Prov. I have a few good friends who've been in and out. The teens are separated from the adults by rules and different wings. In addition, there is an intensive care unit for suicidal people who need twenty-four-hour supervision. That is my destination. I arrive from the emergency room of St. Patrick Hospital and instantly I hate it. I get the sense that I would have arrived in handcuffs if I hadn't just gotten sutures in both wrists even though the nurses are sickeningly polite. They lock me in a room with clear Plexiglas walls and a hospital bed. I am stung with a needle and I fall asleep for a long time.

For a few days at the Prov, I decide that I must be crazy since I'm at the nut hatch. Then I read Catch 22 and decide that I am clearly not crazy if I am capable of thinking that I am. I try to make it clear to the head doctor and nurses that I really do want to live. The basic response is, "be honest and follow the rules." The rules include, but are not by any means limited to, bearing my soul to adults I barely know and taking medication for a bipolar diagnosis. I am tired of turning myself inside out for the scrutinization of constantly shifting groups of authority figures. I refuse all medication except the sleep meds because I do not have what women's magazines still sometimes call manic-depression. I have post traumatic stress disorder and could prove it if the head doctor would just allow my shrink to come and sort it out. I point out to the head doctor that the bipolar diagnosis originated from an evaluation he himself had conducted in early 1995 and I reveal that I was tripping on some heavy black crow LSD during that interview and should be re-evaluated on that basis. This argumentative approach does not earn me a visit from my shrink or a re-evaluation, but rather a round of chemical dependency treatment, a stronger campaign to medicate me, and an extended stay at the Prov. The only trust I earn concerns unlimited access to the juice dispenser and I spitefully drink gallons of cranberry juice just in case they are slipping meds into my food.

They want to know why I tried to kill myself. I tell them over and over that I hadn't slept for six nights. They tell me it's not that

simple, dig deeper. In frustration I laugh and ask if that is a reference to death. They hold their position and I hold mine. After getting angry and shouting a few times I switch tactics and laugh at them. I don't know who is making the argument more circular, but I feel like I'm winning since there is only one of me and enough of them to fill a baseball roster. I also feel like the world is utterly against me. And not in the casual teen angst way common to my peers.

I will be at the Talbot Center until August 1997. Before I am discharged, I claw my way up from a post-suicide attempt level 0 to level 4, the next to highest level. Then, days after I earn this ranking, I get barred back to level 1 for a scandal involving a female house mate. I rejected most of her juvenile advances, but the one time I gave in for a kiss was enough to make her vindictive when I refused her in the future. Staff found out about our affair and I got punished for not telling them about it. The incident gets mentioned repeatedly at my graduation, as though I have pulled a fast one and really am not ready for real life, but they don't want to come right out and say it. And it's true, I'm not ready. I will return to a turbulent home life. I will be institutionalized two more times and arrested a few dozen times before I reach adulthood. I will be on probation and parole again. I will not graduate high school. It will be over a decade before I recognize the relationship between trust, the truth, and honesty, but even then I won't fully understand the syntax of that equation.

If I had trusted any of them I would have given them the key to finding the truth in my flippant attitude. I would have told them that the best jokes have honest hearts of darkness and therefore laughter is the best policy. I would tell them that I am almost sixteen and I have lived in the company of counselors and broken children for fifteen months and the easiest way for me to be honest is to make jokes. And I would tell them that I am just now finding the words to express how truth is a variable dependent upon who is listening.