

Troy Alters

by Kelly Crull

“It is with great honor and privilege that I present to you the graduating class of Calumet University.” The man behind the podium extended his arm in the direction of the rows of restless graduates. The organ began to play as they rose from their folding chairs and released their hats in the air, filling the sky like a flock of birds.

Troy Alters hugged and smiled his way through the crowd, stopping occasionally to shake hands and meet parents. His mother and father, Julie and Donovan, were eyeing him from across the auditorium, anxiously hoping to meet him somewhere in the middle. His mother reached him first, her arms stretched towards him and tears rolling down her cheeks. “Oh, Troy,” she gushed, holding his head over her shoulder. “We’re so proud!,” she blurted, tightening her squeeze. His father stood to the side, waiting for a hug and a firm handshake. “It’s an important day for you,” he assured Troy, “only the beginning.” He patted his son on the back.

Julie and Don were proud of their son--probably even more so than most. He was their only child, and in many ways he was just like them. He was polite and funny when he needed to be, and most of the time people liked him. His parents enjoyed entertaining guests and loved him all the more for bringing home his college friends for Sunday lunch. Don would make stir-fry, and they would sit for hours on the deck talking about politics and the economy, and even sometimes the arts because Julie and Don loved the orchestra.

Only one thing about about Troy kept his parents up at night whispering in the glow of their night light. He hadn’t mentioned any

career plans, none whatsoever, as far as they could tell. He had done as well as any student could have hoped in college, even taking upon himself the burden of a double major: business and economics. Don had naturally assumed his son was headed in his direction, selling insurance from a desk in a stuffy office building. But when he asked, Troy simply looked out the patio door into the evening sky and said, “Could you pass me the applesauce.”

Don and Julie weren’t the kind of parents to press their child, so they tried as best they could to avoid confrontations about the matter.

“Oh Don, I know how you feel about it, but really, do we have to know?” Julie watched her husband from across the kitchen as she finished rinsing the broccoli.

“Well, of course we don’t *have* to know, but aren’t you curious, at least a little,” he offered, setting the newspaper on the kitchen table.

“I’m curious--why wouldn’t I be,” Julie stated, “he’s my son.” She dried her hands on the towel next to the sink. “But I really don’t see anything we can do about it.” She walked across the kitchen to her husband, “Besides, he has enough things to think about--maybe he forgot to tell us.” She sat down.

“Forgot?” Don said, trying to contain himself. “What else is there to think about? He’s graduating. Once he walks off that college campus, he has no responsibilities, no income, no nothing!” He shook his head in disgust, rubbing the stubble on his chin with his fingers.

“Alright, alright,” he said, trying to come to resolution, “we’ve talked long enough about this. Let’s just try to keep some peace around

here.” He picked up the paper again and began to read.

The Saturday after graduation Troy got up a little after nine. He ate some Grape Nuts, took a long shower, and went to work in the garage. He pushed the button next to the broom closet and the garage door opened, the sun casting a warm glow on decades of storage. Troy sighed, already wiping sweat from his brow. He stepped over the gas-powered tiller, scooted across a pile of cardboard boxes, and lifted a canvas covered in mildew. He smiled, hand dusting Dad’s old oak desk from grandpa’s furniture store.

A half an hour later his father pulled on the driveway in his Jeep Cherokee and stepped into the garage. Troy had managed to clear a path from the desk to the kitchen door.

“Hi dad,” Troy grunted, tugging at the desk with his fingers curled.

“Hi,” Don responded, hesitantly scratching the remaining wisps of hair on his head. “So, what’s all this about?” He nodded at Troy’s mess.

“Oh,” Troy said confidently, “I want the oak desk in my room. I hope that’s alright.” He pulled at the desk again. “By the way,” he continued, “do you know where the typewriter is?”

Don stared at his son for a moment, bewildered, “If you mean that rusty one mom used for making address labels, I think it’s under the bed in the guest bedroom.” He continued to look at his son, hoping to make some sense of the situation.

“Ok, thanks Dad, that’s the one place I wouldn’t have looked.” Troy stopped long enough to smile before continuing to struggle with the desk, moving it first to the left, then

to the right.

Without an offer to help, Don stepped into the kitchen, closing the door behind him. He muttered under his breathe as he walked across the kitchen and into the living room where his wife sat on the floor stamping red stars on kindergarten art work.

“Julie,” Don started, shaking his pointer finger in the direction he had just come, “Troy is in the garage,” he worked his lips nervously, “and he asked me where the typewriter is.” He walked across the living room to the steps, then back again, stopping in front of his wife. “I don’t get it.” He held out his hands in surrender.

Julie shrugged her shoulders and smiled innocently, holding the stamper in her hand. “He says he needs an office,” she said matter-of-factly. “You can’t have an office without a desk.”

“An office?” Don exclaimed, continuing to shake his head. “Well what’s he need an office for?” He sat down in the lazyboy, nibbling at his fingers.

“He says he’s going to be a writer,” Julie said pleasantly, stamping another paper. “Maybe a novel, he says, or a play if he feels up to it.”

Don took a deep breathe, sliding his hand down his face and across his chin, resting his elbow on the chair arm. “He’s a good kid, Julie, and God knows I love him.” He paused for a moment, searching his wife’s eyes, “but it’s things like this--with the typewriter--that I don’t understand. I don’t know a single person who writes for a living, and now you’re telling me that my son, my only son, is going to be a writer.”

That evening Troy sat at the dinner table,

the BBQ chicken cooling on his plate. He was pointing with his fork and saying, “So basically, I’ll help around the house during the day and write at night.”

“In your office,” Don added.

“Exactly,” Troy said, finally leaning back in his chair. “So, what do you guys think?” He looked at Julie and Don, his eyes shining.

Don sat across the table, hunched over his plate, slowly eating his noodles. He looked at his wife.

“Well,” Julie said, clearing her throat, “of course we want what’s best for you. Your father and I talked this afternoon, and we want you to do whatever you feel is right.”

Troy smiled happily, pounding his fist on the table. “Thanks, I knew you would understand!” He stood up from the table. “I’m going to start right now,” he said, sliding in his chair and walking out of the kitchen.

Monday morning Julie found a typed poem lying in front of her bedroom door.

Dear Mother,

I’m making a trip to the paper shop this morning. I grabbed the laundry bags from the bathroom. I’ll stop at the laundromat on the way home. I hope you enjoy this poem...

*Oh mother, mother, of the sea
Oh, how you are dear to me*

*Waves of life may pass us by
But my love goes with you when you die*

Love,

Troy

p.s. I’ll have supper ready when you get home from work.

Julie closed her eyes, breathing in the sweet aroma of motherhood. She walked gaily to the kitchen, softly humming a tune, her bathrobe swinging freely about her. All apprehensions had been lifted. Even Don had left for work in high spirits. Troy had handed him a cup of coffee on his way out the door and promised to cut the grass and change oil in the Jeep. Tonight he was making stuffed green peppers for supper.

The changes taking place in the Alters household were curious--much like someone becoming accustomed to a bright light after behind in a dark room. Julie and Don slowly began to take great comfort in their son’s chosen occupation. He kept the fridge stocked, the cars washed, and the lawn watered. He was the spark that ignited their passions, illuminating a world of possibilities they had never dreamed of. Julie giggled every night as she curled up on the couch under an afghan to watch the evening news, something she had always dreamed of doing from the kitchen.

“Are you sure you don’t want any help with the vegetable?” she would ask, stepping in from the garage and putting her purse in the closet.

“No, mom,” Troy would insist, “it’s my responsibility.”

She would laugh playfully and dash unashamed to the living room, searching the coffee table for the television remote.

Don was even running after work, something he hadn’t done since his last 5K in

high school. He would come home just before supper and jog into the kitchen in his sweatpants, still swinging his arms and breathing heavily. "I feel great, Julie," he would holler into the living room, bending over and touching his fingertips to the floor. "I'm a new man!"

News of Troy's peculiar occupation soon spread through the small town of Stockton. Teachers would gather around the coffee maker during morning recess, and Julie would laugh hysterically, "We love him, and we want the best for him," she should say, holding her hands to her bosom, "isn't that what every mother wants?"

"But what about his finances?" the insurance salesman would ask, sitting at the conference table eating doughnut holes.

"The way I see it," Don would say, leaning back in his chair and casually folding his hands behind his head, "sometimes a man has to take risks." He would pause for effect. "If all goes well, my son may become Stockton's first celebrity."

All skepticisms were thrown to the wind once rumor spread that Troy's first chapter--36 pages in all--had been sent to the publishers. He was a local legend. The hum of conversation filled with speculations about his novel and talk of the Alters family.

"My son, Eric, played t-ball with Troy Alters in the second grade," said one from his bar stool at Cobb's Cafe.

"Is that so," said the other. "Was he any good?"

"I don't remember." said the first, taking a sip of his coffee.

The Alters household became a place of reverence. Children walking home from school

with their lunch boxes and violin cases would walk silently past the house with their heads bowed. In the evenings the locals would park across the street under the weeping willows, meditating for a few moments, before continuing to the grocery store or the video rental.

The excitement of the people of Stockton, however, paled in comparison to the extravagance of Julie and Don's devotion--their lives were a living sacrifice to their son. "When I wake up in the mornings," Julie whispered as she snapped off the light and tiptoed to bed, "I'm happier than I've ever been before." She smiled in the darkness as she dropped her slippers to the floor. "I've been thinking," she continued, pulling the covers up to her chin, "Troy has already done so much for us. We should try harder to show him our appreciation."

"Oh, I agree," Don said, speaking quietly but with conviction. "I've been thinking too. What if we got season tickets to the orchestra this year." He turned to face his wife. "If we stay busy at night, Troy can have the house to himself. It's the least we can do."

Julie and Don rested in their beds with the cool breeze blowing in through the window. The next afternoon Julie called the box office from the teacher's lounge, and they planned to go to the orchestra Friday night. That week they enjoyed themselves more than ever before, staying out late like college kids. They went for coffee and cards, even took a romantic walk on the lake. They were closer in their relationship than they had ever been before.

Unfortunately, no one seemed to notice that Troy Alters wasn't a part of it all--wasn't

even a character in his own story. Nobody had ever bothered to ask Troy why he wanted to be writer. If anyone had, he would have cocked his head, squinted his eyes slightly, and said, "It's because I have to say something." And if anyone would have pressed him further, he would have laughed and said, "No, oh, no I don't have any idea what that something is. Definitely not. But it's there." That's all Troy needed was knowing he had a purpose--something existed within the realm of possibility, and it was his job to find out what it was and get it on paper.

What Troy didn't realize was that this is no small task. In fact, he was utterly confused that first evening when he left his parents at the dinner table and jogged to his room to write. Sitting at the typewriter, his fingers poised, he realized he had nothing to write about--absolutely nothing. He stared dumbly at the textures on his bedroom wall trying to imagine anyone doing anything. The more he tried, the less he could. He tried pacing, and dancing, even singing, but nothing came.

Weeks began to pass, and he ran to the paper shop, but only to look at the paper. He didn't know why, but he felt comfortable there, touching the clean, white sheets with his palms.

He'd written a few scraps of poetry, but nothing really until one day when his mother made toast. He wasn't expecting anything because he only wrote at night, and he was sitting across the room folding underwear from a basket. His mother was at the fridge, her head hidden behind the door, and the toast popped up--that was it. He froze with a pair of his boxers in his hand, and looked around,

as if someone had caught him off guard with the flash of a camera. He searched the room, looking for something, before his eyes settled on the chrome toaster, sitting squarely on the counter, the toast a light brown. He stared for a few minutes, his mother leaving the room, and his mind flickered, trying to remember. He repeated the image in his head, the two pieces of tan bread jumping from the metal box smeared with buttery fingerprints. He didn't believe it until he wrote it down. The motion, the sound, the expression. He started slow, still doubting, but the moment clarified and soon his hands ached as the words spilled onto the page. Somehow, he later decided, he had given a piece of himself away in that moment.

He felt good about his toaster poem, and he decided not to write at night anymore, although his parents were too busy to notice. He wrote whenever a moment asked him to, and strangely enough, began to collect thoughts, poems, even essays about appliances around the house. It seemed peculiar to him at first, writing about the bread maker and then the electric pencil sharpener, but soon he forgot about this. He wasn't afraid anymore, at least not of the moments or of capturing them.

Troy was proud of the pages neatly stacked on his nightstand, and more than anything he wanted to share them with his parents. But something inside of him turned when he thought about it. Something about the pages, the pieces of himself hidden in the words, seemed too delicate. As if the pages might burst into flame the moment they left his fingertips. "I'll write one more tomorrow," he said, reaching for the lamp next to his bed,

“then I’ll be ready.” But when tomorrow came, he wasn’t sure anymore. “When I’m ready, I’ll know,” he assured himself, “I just have to wait.”

For the sake of what was best, he told his parents he was writing a novel. Of course he didn’t say much about it, but enough to keep him relaxed and his parents happy.

One night, however, something quite unexpected happened at the dinner table. It was Friday around six and Don and Julie planned to go to the orchestra. Once again Julie was complimenting her son.

“Don, did you see what Troy did today in the garden?” she asked, putting down her fork and looking at her husband. “He planted radishes,” she said with astonishment. She smiled across the table at her son, and Don nodded with approval.

“We’ve never had radishes,” she added, reaching for the milk.

Troy smiled mildly, watching her carefully fill her glass.

“How was work today, honey?” she asked, changing the subject.

Don had his elbow on the table. “Fine,” he said, scratching his forehead, “Rich is on vacation so I’m overloaded. But we’re getting an intern next week.”

Troy was watching his father, spooning some more beans onto his plate, when he stopped. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his mother gently rolling her fork in her hand.

“Mom,” he whispered sharply, his eyes still on the fork as he rose from his chair.

“Mom,” he said again.

Julie and Don stopped and looked at their son, and then at each other. “What Troy?” she asked, “what’s wrong?”

Troy reached for the pen and paper on the kitchen counter and began to scribble words frantically. “Nothing’s wrong,” he said, trying not to confuse his words, “I mean, it’s your hand” He looked up again from the paper, “and the fork.”

Julie looked at her hand, confused.

“What do you mean, her hand and the fork?” Don asked, his eyebrows pinched together at his nose.

Troy finished writing his thought and looked at his father. “I don’t know,” he said, laughing apologetically, “It’s difficult to explain.”

Julie stared blankly at her plate.

“This is it. This is what I do.” Troy shrugged, holding the piece of paper in his hand.

“Here, read it,” he said, sliding the paper across the table. “I’ve got more,” he added, watching his parents stare at the page on the table. “I’ve been meaning to show you.” he hesitated, “I’ll be back in a minute.” He ran to his room, grabbing the stack of papers from his night stand, and returned to the kitchen. His mother was reading the page, holding it hesitantly in her hands. He set the stack of papers down on the table next to his father and returned to his seat. Don picked up the first page, shaking his head, and began to read. He smiled and laughed abruptly as he finished, rereading the last few lines. He flicked at his nose and looked at his son.

“I don’t get it,” he said, his eyebrows raised. “What is this?” He waved his hand at the paper sitting in front of him.

Troy laughed nervously, “What do you mean?”

“I mean this isn’t it,” he said, looking

doubtfully at the page, "It can't be. What about the novel?" He looked again at his son.

"There is no novel," Troy said, laughing again, "I wanted to surprise you."

He watched anxiously as his mother covered her face with her hands, her shoulders beginning to shake.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull here, Troy," his father hollered, "but you better shape up." He pushed himself away from the table and stood up, looking once more at his son, and walking out of the kitchen.

He watched, his lips trembling, as his mother quietly excused herself from the table, sniffing and holding her hand to her mouth, afraid to look at her son.

He listened from the table a few minutes later as the Jeep rolled off the driveway. He sat motionless, his shoulders forward and his head hung over his plate.

He could hear the quietness, and it sounded like a soft buzz in his ears. He lifted himself slowly from his chair and walked with his hands in his pockets to the patio door. His reflection glared back at him like a ghost on the thin surface, his eyes pleading and his lips straight and thin. He seemed unaware of the houses and the low-hanging sun.

He turned and walked back to the table, staring past the lettuce bowl at the stack of papers lying by his father's plate. Carefully he reached across the table and gathered the pages in his arms, reading them one by one, his eyes following the typed words.

When he finished, he went to the patio door once more and turned the lock. He opened the door and stepped onto the deck. The wind, warm and dry, beat against his face

and passed through his lips. He drew in a deep breathe, the cool air circulated in his chest, and closed his eyes. Lifting the sheets of paper in front of him, he stepped forward and listened to the wind, whipping the pages from his hands and sending them circling into the night.