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Life Is Good-If But Briefly

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

LIFE IS GOOD—IF BUT BRIEFLY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Tim Curtis

2014

To: Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Tim Curtis, and entitled Life Is Good—If But Briefly, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment. We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Lynne Barrett

Bruce Harvey

John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 3, 2014

The thesis of Tim Curtis is approved.

Dean Kenneth G. Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2014

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DEDICATION

To all the dyslexic kids that were told they were too lazy to learn—never stop dreaming.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank spellcheck, without it, none of this would have been possible.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
LIFE IS GOOD—IF BUT BRIEFLY

by

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Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

LIFE IS GOOD—IF BUT BRIEFLY is a contemporary, satirical novel written in the third person. Walter Dingles, the story's protagonist, is an introspective twenty-two-year-old with a knack for screwing things up. After finishing college, Walter realizes he's emotionally ill prepared to face the world on his own. He moves back home vowing to get his shit together. He lands a job at his old high school, but his efforts are exacerbated when his grandfather's porn collection ends up in the principal's office, he unknowingly begins taking his mother's estrogen supplements, and family secrets come to the fore. In the end, Walter comes to accept himself. Set in the heartland, LIFE IS GOOD—IF BUT BRIEFLY plays against the region's reputation as a bastion of conservatism and wholesome family values, while expressing the mood and anxiety of a generation coming of age in a down economy.

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Chapter One

The August desert sun was blowtorch frying the top of Walter Dingles' big red head, and his serious, post-celebratory hangover was causing him to regret every decision he'd ever made. Walter's shit was so-not-together he had to stop and puke in between cramming all the prized possessions he'd collected at Arizona flea markets and garage sales into the '94 burgundy Chevy Lumina minivan his mother had given him when he drove off to college. At that time, Walter's mother had just gotten a new, silver BMW 750Li as an engagement gift from her then soon-to-be newest husband, Mr. William Wurzel. Walter only met the guy a couple of times before heading off to college, but wasn't surprised when he later learned his mother had coerced Mr. Wurzel into writing a check, in one lump sum, up front, for Walter's college education. His mother was a hard bargainer.

When he'd finished packing, Walter took his ADHD medication a second time and puked again, this time all over his original artwork, a T-shirt that read *It Doesn't Do You Much Good to Be Smart If You're Lazy* printed in an unsteady hand using a black magic marker. Walter knew better than to drive all day without his meds—between being jumpy and his dyslexia, he was liable to pull off at every other exit—but he'd already blown two of them, and he figured what the hell, things couldn't get much worse.

Walter's four-and-a-half-year stint of partying at Arizona State University was over. He'd graduated, conditionally, two and a half months earlier in May without distinction and nary a family member in attendance, and spent June and July making up

the six credits he needed to make it official. He now had a bachelor's degree in art and only one job prospect. He couldn't decide which would be worse, going back to live with his mother or the prospect of teaching at his old high school. The odds he'd have to face both of those possibilities seemed too preposterous to even contemplate.

He'd missed every graduate art program deadline, and, even if he'd applied, his portfolio documentation sucked. He couldn't even get his old summer job back organizing games and teaching crafts to CampCan's special needs kids in Flagstaff, and it was his own damn fault. What the fuck was he thinking when he had his little handicapped CampCan charges make T-shirts for Parents Weekend that read *We Like to Watch*. He wasn't trying to be cute or mean, he thought it was apropos, empowering even, albeit in a circuitous kind of way. But in the age of political correctness, the parents didn't see it that way. Walter had always had trouble with the whole cause and effect thing, particularly the effect aspect of the equation, which had a way of sneaking up on him. Was it his ADHD or a maturity issue? He couldn't be sure, but he intended to work on it. So, after a hard night of halfhearted celebrating with the few friends he still had in Tempe, it was time to cut his losses and move back home.

Walter kept telling himself, Get your shit together. He wasn't sure what it meant, but he knew his wasn't. Walter was familiar with the phrase "drastic situations call for drastic measures," and now that it was happening, he considered moving back to St. Louis pretty goddamn drastic. That meant living in a house he'd never seen with his intimidating, aloof mother, who insisted her kids call her Dabney, and her newest husband, Mr. Honchkiss, whom Walter had yet to meet. According to Walter's fifteen-year-old half-sister, Patty Pees, this Mr. H was a real doozy. Dabney's collection of last

names La Bonya-Dingles-Van Munster-Pees-Wurzel-Honchkiss verified her preference for short-term relationships. La Bonya being her maiden name.

But that was his hangover rationalizing the morning's pain, and hangovers have a way of weeding out the nuances of thorny situations. In truth, Walter had been wrestling with his decision to move back home since the whole Mina Bissel thing went down at the end of his junior year, and he'd come to the shameful realization that he wasn't ready to face the world on his own. This, along with his hangover, accounted for his current bout of self-loathing. He had the vague sense that he wasn't fully formed, that some key element in his development hadn't properly blossomed yet. Walter couldn't remember a time when he didn't have the nagging suspicion that he was somehow responsible for his mother's lack of warmth. Her inability to show affection had left Walter feeling . . . lonely, in a way that was hard to explain. And knowing that his kid-sister was going through the same thing, or more, because of his absence left Walter with a desire, or perhaps it was a sense of duty, to protect his kid sister or at least be there for her until she made it out of the house. He found it difficult to be more specific, but his yearning for something familial was real, no matter how dysfunctional his family was. That's why he'd applied for a job at his old high school. People who taught high school had their shit together, therefore, if he got the job, he'd have his together, or so Walter's reasoning went. But beyond that, he desperately wanted to be emotionally capable enough to stand on his own, to have the financial ability to afford his own place, and to have a girlfriend who was ready for a real relationship, not one riddled with juvenile insecurities, his or hers. Therefore, Walter needed to get his shit together.

By the time Walter had finished packing, his T-shirt and shorts were drenched

with a boozy sweat. So, before heading out, Walter rummaged around in a box and chose a T-shirt with the Oral-B toothbrush logo flipped to read, *B-Oral*. He'd screen-printed it himself using blue ink that matched the Oral-B logo. That was Walter's style, hand written or screen-printed, not too slick, not too polished. He felt it lent an air of authenticity to his artistic endeavor. He'd passed over a T-shirt that read *A Sandwich Can Be A Hero Too*, because there was nothing heroic about a college graduate moving back home.

It was almost noon by the time Walter planted his six-foot-three, two hundred eighteen pound frame on the tattered driver's seat, hung the tassel from his graduation cap with its little gold plastic 2011 insignia on the rearview mirror, and ran his brawny hand through his short-cropped hair. He'd saved the passenger seat for the box containing his grandfather's porn collection. Grandpa Buster La Bonya had loaned it to Walter, authorizing him to contemporize it, and fill in some gaps while he was away at college. Walter had never known his father. Therefore, even though he'd only met his grandpa a few times, Walter was flattered, and arduously applied himself to the task. At that time, it was strictly old school, nothing digital, just good old glossy girl-next-door types with unshaved bushes dating back to WWII. Under Walter's care, the collection had nearly doubled in size, and there was nary a pubic hair to be found.

The minivan was loaded from its worn floor mats to the nicotine stained headliner, and sat low on bad shocks. His legs were cramped because he'd had to scoot the driver's seat forward three inches to accommodate the huge, tattered Mickey Mouse doll he'd found at a Salvation Army Store. It had been part of an installation he'd created for the annual senior art exhibition, and he'd won second prize with it. Only now he

discovered those three inches caused his burgeoning belly to rub against the steering wheel, and the big black dildo he'd stuck on Mickey was poking Walter in the back, and he felt nauseated.

Walter took Arizona's Interstate 17 north. Two and a half hours later, he'd eaten two Double Quarter Pounders with Cheese, large fries, and a Mickey D's Baked Apple Pie. After he merged onto Interstate 40 heading east, tears began to stream down his flushed cheeks as he watched Flagstaff recede in his review mirror. Working at CampCan the previous summer had been just about the only time Walter could remember feeling truly good about himself. Walter became so distraught he had to pull over to the shoulder and stop. He alternated between pounding on the steering wheel screaming "fuck, fuck, fuck" and hanging his head over it and sobbing. If only he'd gotten his old job back. Son-of-a-bitch, this wasn't supposed to be happening. This emotional convulsion wasn't about puking up his meds. Walter was having a complete meltdown. Somehow life had caught up with him. He was an adult now, and adults were supposed to have their shit together, and here he was massively hung over, moving back home and crying his fool head off. If this wasn't a life crisis, then he didn't want any part of one.

He drove the rest of the afternoon alternating between being mesmerized by the rippling heat waves that fractured his vision, as they rose from the endless baking asphalt that stretched out before him, and fighting the hot, dry steady winds and eighteen-wheelers that jostled the overloaded van making steering an unrelenting task. Walter's radio offered little distraction from his self-loathing. He could either listen to country western music fade in and out or Justin Timberlake singing "Sexy Back" over and over again. Walter figured lots of people had good reason to scream when they heard