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Family Medicine

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

FAMILY MEDICINE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Jaimie Eubanks

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
Colleges of Arts, Sciences, and Education

This thesis, written by Jaimie Eubanks, and entitled Family Medicine, 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.

Debra Dean

Nathaniel Cadle

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 30, 2017.

The thesis of Jaimie Eubanks is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
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Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

FAMILY MEDICINE

by

Jaimie Eubanks

Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

The novel FAMILY MEDICINE follows three married women as they struggle to define themselves in Foley, South Dakota, a small town where privacy is nearly impossible.

Marcy Morrow, a queen bee, in a vulnerable moment reveals misgivings about her second pregnancy to Bridget Cunningham, the wife of Dr. Herb Cunningham and his office manager at the town's only medical practice. Bridget's offer of off-the-books help begins a chain of secrecy into which Dr. Maka Smith, the practice's other physician, is reluctantly pulled. Meanwhile Marcy and Bridget's husbands run for mayor, forcing the women to reexamine their lives, ambitions, and the nature of friendship.

The use of multiple perspectives, as in Anne Tyler's Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, helps reveal motives while heightening tension. FAMILY MEDICINE's focus on a small community, like that Jane Austen's Emma, uncovers the rivalries, alliances, and power of gossip in a circumscribed world.

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Chapter 1

Summer in November

On Saturday night, nearly two-hundred people were crammed into the multi-purpose room of Foley's First Lutheran Church for the "Summer in November" fundraiser. Rubber-soled dress shoes left black scuff marks on the linoleum-floored basketball court, all of them aiming for the buffet underneath the basketball hoop near the kitchen. Half the fundraiser committee stood behind the buffet table and tried one more time to close the accordion partition that separated the room from the kitchen, which hadn't been set right on its tracks since a child threw a basketball at it last winter. Bridget Cunningham stood at the other end of the court near the cake walk, staring at them. When the committee members finally succeeded and their purses could stay out of sight, piled in a tangled mess on the counter, Bridget let out an involuntary sigh of relief.

A broad-shouldered man stopped at Bridget's side and Bridget flattened herself against the wall to make room for his family with paper plates loaded with summer foods — bratwurst, corn on the cob, and potato salad.

Bridget turned her attention to the cake walk, where Cheryl Johnston sat spilling over each side of her folding chair, chin in her hand, as children marched in a slow circle to the tune of The Beach Boys' "God Only Knows."

Nobody had given Bridget anything to do at the "Summer in November" fundraiser, even though she was on the committee. She had volunteered to come in early and fix the partition, but they said it wasn't necessary. She'd also offered to donate a

salad and to color in the giant thermometer poster they were using to show the night's fundraising progress to attendees, but Marcy Morrow had told her she should just be ready to "fill in as needed." Marcy was the *nobody* who had given Bridget nothing to do. Really, the trouble was that Marcy was *somebody*, a very important somebody in Foley, South Dakota, whose 5,000 residents seemed to agree that Marcy was destined to run the town. After all, that's what her mother, Linda, had done for the past twenty years, until her husband's death last year had left her too out of sorts for leadership.

"God Only Knows" was a longer song than Bridget remembered. The children in the cake walk— including Bridget's five year-old, Kaitlynn— seemed to slow down with each step, their shoulders slumping. It was like their batteries were running down. Some of them were barely lifting their feet off the ground, wrinkling the construction paper cake that had been taped to the ground to mark the winning spot. Cheryl Johnston seemed to have forgotten about the children altogether. Finally, Bridget thought, something I can do.

"Why don't you let me take over for you?" Bridget asked Cheryl. "Go get a snack."

"Well, fine," Cheryl said.

Bridget watched the heave of her chest as she hoisted herself up and headed across the room to the buffet. Cheryl really was an Eeyore of a woman.

Bridget took her seat, the record player to her left, the cake display table to her right, and finally "God Only Knows" came to an end, along with side A of the record. All

of the children stopped in their tracks. Two fifth-grade boys were both barely standing on the construction-paper cake that was taped to the floor. There was no clear winner, and a scuffle broke out between the boys, mostly huffing and puffing and one not-so-gentle shove. Bridget didn't mediate. In the end, she wrote the winning boy's name on a card and placed it in front of the least kid-friendly cake she could find: pineapple upside-down cake. The rules stated that the winner was supposed to get to choose his own cake, and he wanted something with frosting. The rules also stated that Bridget was supposed to stop the record, not let the record play through to the end, so he was lucky he got a cake out of it anyway. The boy and his friends—including the cake walk runner-up— left in a huff, but some others, including Marcy's daughter, Rose, joined the group. Bridget reached over and started the record at the beginning of side A. She didn't really know how to use a record player, and Cheryl seemed to only have the one record. It was a relief when "Sloop John B" came on. At least that song was happier. And she was doing something.

Tonight's event was to raise money for an ambulance. The church would donate to the town. Foley's hospital had closed over a decade before, and now the county only had one ambulance. It was rented from a private company and came with an EMT service. The ambulance would rush patients to Bridget's husband Herb's office or ninety miles east to the hospital in Watertown. One ambulance for the people in Foley and the townships on the outskirts included in the lease wasn't nearly enough.

This became painfully obvious last year when Robert Paulsen, the mayor and Marcy's father, skidded on black ice by the lake on his drive into town to meet his wife,

Linda, for a date night at Matt's on Pine, the finest restaurant in Foley. Herb had rushed to the scene. Robert was alive when Herb got there, but an ambulance has equipment. Robert's heart rate crashed, and without a defibrillator, Herb couldn't stabilize him. Robert Paulsen died at the age of fifty-four. From time to time, Bridget still caught her husband staring listlessly in the direction of the Paulsen house. He and Robert had been close friends since they were kids. Herb would never forgive himself.

Marcy would never forgive him, either, Bridget suspected. Especially because, a year before Robert's death, Foley had elected Herb as the "vice mayor." This position—an honorary title given to one elected alderperson—put Herb first in the Foley line of succession, making Herb the mayor when Robert passed.

The committee was formed by Foley First Lutheran. The wives of First Lutheran—the ones who'd never managed that transition back to full-time work once their children were grown—would raise the hundred thousand they needed, and the church would give it to the town as a gift. Bridget, trying her best to fill the shoes of Mrs. Mayor Dr. Cunningham, had eagerly volunteered to join the committee. This was the sort of thing that wives should do.

"What are you doing? Where's Cheryl?" a woman said.

Bridget looked up.

Marcy stood over her, blocking the fluorescent lights, which made a sort of halo. Somehow, Marcy's chestnut ponytail didn't have a single flyaway, even in backlighting. This was the sort of thing Bridget always tried and never achieved.

“Cheryl seemed worn out, so I told her I could fill in for her,” Bridget said. “She’s getting a snack.”

“You can’t just move Cheryl off because you feel like it.”

“She’d forgotten about the kids.”

“Look, Cheryl’s sensitive. She needs to feel needed. Got it?”

Bridget fought a groan. “Fine. Got it.”

Marcy walked away in the direction of the raffle tables, which had been set up on the stage that ran parallel to the court. The Beach Boys had begun “I Know There’s An Answer.” The kids looked miserable marching, going nowhere. Bridget pulled the needle from the record, forgetting to watch that Kaitlynn didn’t win, and endowed her five year-old with an entire German chocolate cake.

“Really,” Cheryl said, returning to cake walk duty with a plate for herself, “your own daughter? At least try not to play favorites, my God.”

Bridget stood, and Cheryl reassumed her throne as master of the cake walk.

Bridget knelt down next to Kaitlynn to help her write her name on the winning card. The next day, Bridget would take the gorgeous layer cake to the office to share with the staff.

“There we go,” Bridget said, folding another notecard to form a stand so Kaitlynn could admire her over-sized printing next to the cake. As Bridget set the card down her knuckle grazed the frosting, and she licked it off. Bridget didn’t eat sweets much anymore, or any junk food, really. The super-sweet taste coated her tongue, and she shuddered.