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Veracity: A Work of Fiction

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I will be an integrated strategic communications senior at the University of Kentucky. I am a member of Phi Eta Sigma, Golden Key National Honor Society, and a previously published author in *Kaleidoscope*. As an advertising major, creativity is a must — and I explore this through two of my favorite hobbies, writing and playing piano. I also enjoy reading, listening to music, swimming, and spending time with friends and family.

"Veracity" was written over the course of several months and has seen no fewer than five drafts. The story uses a limited omniscient ‘third-person’ point of view to show the inner thoughts and turmoil of the main character, Isabelle, as she sits through her father’s funeral. Flashbacks are used to show the close relationship between the father and daughter and what she learns from these events. Isabelle’s frustrations and anger about the funeral become evident through her interactions with the various characters who are sent to check on her, until finally, at the end, she finds someone who truly understands how she feels. My faculty mentor, Nikky Finney, was a great help to me in the writing process, always willing to read over new material and critique it for me. She helped me better understand my characters, which allowed the story to flow more easily and take on a life of its own. As all great teachers do, she assisted me without being too intrusive.

I would like to thank several people who helped along the way — Nikky Finney, Christie Perry, Aaron Shraberg, and the members of my English 407 class, who all took the time to read through the story and offer me their thoughts and criticisms.

**Veracity**

**A work of fiction**

**Author’s Note**

Nearly everyone has attended a funeral at some point in their life. We’re all accustomed to the kind of behavior that’s considered acceptable in a funeral setting — the soft, kind words and happy, positive memories that are shared. The main character of “Veracity” disregards traditional behaviors when she is at her father’s funeral, yet shows to the reader that she is honoring his memory in the best way she knows how.

It was the smell that got to her first. The sheer thickness of it choked her. It didn’t matter that the A/C was going full force, the soft, insistent hum nearly drowned out by hushed whispers and sniffles. She lowered her head, gray eyes burning a trail through the cheap blue carpet as she shoved her way through the dense, suffocating crowd. Her elbows brushed across various fabrics: silk, cotton, polyester, wool... all dyed a somber black or navy blue. She was sick of looking at those fabrics, those colors, and even more so of the people belonging to them. She’d had enough of their sad, sympathetic eyes, their red, swollen cheeks, and their forced, watery smiles. And then, of course, the smell. The sickeningly sweet scent that emanated from the floral bouquets and seemed to mock her. It was powerful, overbearing, trying desperately to cover up the situation. She wasn’t fooled. Death, she knew, did not really smell like roses.

This wasn’t how he would have wanted it. She wrestled through the field of mourners, but chose to ignore them. She was drowning, flailing and fighting to get out. Her eyes lifted for the briefest moment, searching for an escape. She could see none, her short stature severely limiting her horizon even when she stood on her toes. The main door appeared to be blocked, hidden behind a wall created by a stocky couple — Tweedledee and a blubbering Tweedledum. Knowing she would never breach that barricade, she swiftly spun on black pumps and resumed her search.
She stumbled past one of her great aunts — or was it her second cousin? The polished wood of a church pew jammed into her shin as she changed direction; she bit back a scream. Lifting her head again, she breathed deeply and allowed a grim smile when she saw a silvery metal door frame that led out into the hall. Eyes fixed, she marched toward it. Her getaway came to a halt when a wiry, warm hand gripped her shoulder, first startling her, then annoying her. She teetered forward on unsteady toes, her momentum pushing against the hand that held her.

"Where are you going?"

She refused to turn around. "Out."

"Out?"

"Yes. Out," she repeated, shrugging him off and plucking an invisible hair from her shoulder. She glanced back at him, her eyes smoldering.

"You should be up there with your mother," her uncle said, giving her his best stern, fatherly look. She narrowed her eyes as he continued. "She's been up there by herself all day."

"Then why don't you go stand with her?"

He fixed her with a glare that would have caused a lesser girl to back down. "First off, he wasn't my father. Secondly, everyone has been wondering why you're not up there greeting with her. It looks bad."

She didn't like his attitude, but two could play at that game. "First off, your powers of observation never cease to amaze, and secondly, everyone else can fuck off."

Before he could come up with an appropriately scathing response, she darted out of reach and dashed through the door, her black velvet skirt brushing against the doorframe as she finally escaped.

There were more mourners out in the hall, but the crowd was considerably thinner. She slowed her steps, carefully surveying the surroundings, looking for someplace that would offer a little solitude. Further down the hall, past the restrooms and the empty Sunday School classrooms, she turned the corner once and arrived at the perfect destination. Just out of reach.

The hallway was wide, probably around ten feet or so, and stretched far back into the bowels of the building. She could barely make out the faint glow of the red EXIT sign at the end. After glancing around to ensure that she was alone, she tossed her purse on the dark blue tile.

"I'm going to the bank tomorrow. I've got a big jar of change that needs to be rolled... Interested?"

She shrugged amiably. "Sure."

He smiled, standing up from his desk and walking briskly into the other room. "I'll go get it."

She ambled over to his desk, lifting papers and observing some of the responses. EXPLAIN THE NATURALISTIC FALLACY was written at the top of each looseleaf page. Underneath this request were various explanations from the students, none of which made very much sense to her. She doubted they made much sense to him, either.

He returned, a large glass jar in one hand, a box full of coin wrappers in the other. He handed them to her and returned to his desk.

She sat on the floor, legs crossed, feet neatly under knees. She upturned the jar, sending a cascade of quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies to the floor. They clinked against each other simultaneously, an ocean of coins crashing against a carpeted beach. The television had settled into a comfortable family sitcom. She listened with half an ear to the show while sorting
the change — nickels with nickels, dimes with dimes. Four metal piles were the results. She opened the box and grabbed a handful of five dollar dime wrappers.

Her father sighed periodically, evidently frustrated by his students’ nonsensical answers, or maybe just their lack of effort. The ceiling fan whirred above her, gently ruffling her auburn curls, making them tickle her face. She barely noticed, absorbed in her task, and occasionally brushed a hand across her forehead to push away an errant strand.

She’d finished all the piles except for the largest, the quarters. She leaned back and stretched her hands over her head, yawning loudly. A brief glimpse to her right indicated that her father was still quite irritated by his work.

“Dad?”

“Yes?” He looked up from his paperwork.

“What’s a fallacy?” She worked on the quarters, settling into the comfortable rhythm of counting them and making little stacks. Four to a stack. Ten stacks of four. Roll them up. Repeat. Always the same; never more, never less. It was a reassuring routine.

“A fallacy? Well, there are all kinds of them. Non sequitur, hasty generalization, begging the question —”

“No, no,” she interrupted, taking the completed rolls and piling them in a triangular shape. “What are they? What does it mean?”

“Oh, I see what you’re asking.” He scribbled a few notes on one of his papers. “A fallacy is an often plausible argument using false or illogical inferences.”

She set down another thick roll of quarters, adding it to the pyramid. “In English, please.”

He shook his head and laughed, the deep sound rolling easily from his throat. “Alright, Izzy. Let me see here... a fallacy is like...”

he paused, placing his right index finger against his lips, deep in thought. “Okay. It’s an error in a person’s thinking. An error that will lead to a conclusion or decision that’s wrong.”

“Mmm,” she said, nodding in affirmation. “I see.”

“Well, good. That means you’re at least one step ahead of these guys.” He lifted the completed papers and lightly smacked them with the back of his hand.

“They don’t get it at all.”

“Why?”

“They don’t listen. I could talk ‘til my voice gives out and still nothing will get through to them.”

“Why won’t they listen?”

“I don’t know,” he sighed. He set down his work and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. She paused her quarter-counting and studied him curiously.

“Mom says you work too hard.”

He barked a short laugh. “Does she?”

“Yeah.”

“She might be right about that,” he said thoughtfully.

“But then again, she doesn’t get it either. Like the students. She doesn’t quite understand. She—” he halted abruptly, looking at his daughter. “Never mind. I shouldn’t be telling you this.”

“I get it,” Isabelle supplied helpfully.

His teeth flashed white, and the laugh lines around his face creased deeply.

“I know, Izzy.”

“Good.” She pointed to her pyramid. “I’m done.”

On any other day, the blank canvas before her would not have been quite so captivating. It was just a wall, after all, and not a very pretty one at that. The white latex paint was chipping, and the baseboard was cracked in several places. Yet it offered her comfort, somehow, so she indulged.

“Oh, Izzy, there you are! I’ve been looking all over for you!” A barely controlled, hushed voice interrupted the companionable silence between Isabelle and the wall. Swallowing a groan, she slowly opened her eyes and let them rest on the person before her.

Kristen Martin could be described as a tall, fair blonde, although that would be doing her more justice than she deserved. “Tall” was usually associated with slender, while Kristen was just skinny, with long, awkward arms and legs; jutting elbows and wrists. “Fair” was really just a politically correct way of saying “pale.” And her hair, although a true natural honey blond, had been abused by numerous failed perms, leaving a dry, frizzy tangle atop her head.

“Hey,” Kristen said, her voice considerably calmer. She eased down to the floor next to Isabelle, sitting Indian-style. Her shoes rubbed and squeaked against the tile. Isabelle ignored her.

“Oh... your mother asked me to come check on you,” Kristen whispered, as if she were speaking to a child. “She wants to know if you’ll come back inside and stand with her.”

Isabelle rolled her eyes and looked the other way. Kristen’s brow furrowed. “So, have you been out here all this time? Are you okay?”

Nothing.

“My mom was telling me about your dad earlier... They went to school together. She said he was a real nice guy. Smart, too.” Kristen bit her lip anxiously, waiting to see what effect this statement produced.

“What else did she say?” Isabelle’s voice was eerily calm and even.

“Oh, lots of things. She just talked about what a great guy he was, and how much everyone here will miss him... Izzy, are you okay?”

Isabelle knew her face was slowly fading red; she could feel the heat rising from her throat on up. Gritting her teeth, she scrutinized the nervous girl squirming beside her. The same girl who had scarcely spoken to her all through elementary, junior, and senior high schools, except to borrow a pen or ask for her vote in some school election. Isabelle’s mother had probably assumed that “classmate” equated to “friend” and “demographic” was related to “understanding,” and that was why this clueless diplomat was here in the first place.
If you ask me if I need anything, I'll scream. “Well... Izzy, you know, if you need anything, anything, just let me know.”

Of course. “Don’t call me that,” she said tightly.

“Well!” Kristen was thoroughly bewildered. Isabelle casually unzipped her purse, breaking eye contact. “Izzy. Don’t call me that.”

“But - I thought that was your nickname. I mean, I’ve heard your father call you that—”

“Really? And are you my father now?” She pulled out a round, golden compact and flipped it open, poring over her complexion.

“I—” Kristen broke off, her face wavering between confusion and anger. “I was just trying to help.”

“Well, you’ve failed grandly. Congratulations. Now make sure you run back and tell all your friends what a bitch I really am.”

Kristen’s mouth dropped slightly, revealing a light silver line of metal.

Finally.

“You’re sixteen! Enjoy it!”

“Really?”

“I-”

“Well, if you wanted to read, maybe you could go outside and read...”

“I like it in here. It’s quiet.”

“Izabelle,” her mother said, exasperated. “You should get out more. You’re sixteen! Enjoy it! One of these days you’ll regret spending all your time cooped up in here.”

“I doubt it.”

During this exchange, her father had been watching them with ill-concealed amusement. He finally spoke up. “Go easy on her, Kate. She can’t help it. She gets it from my side of the family. We’re all anti-social.”

He gave her a cheeky grin.

Isabelle smiled gratefully at him. Her mother sighed. “Don’t go putting excuses like that in her head, Jon. Why do you always stay in here? Don’t you get lonely?” She directed the questions at her daughter. Isabelle shrugged. “No.”

Just think of all the fantastic, fascinating people out there, just waiting for you to meet them! But you never will, because you spend all your time reading books or doing puzzles.”

“I don’t like people.”

“Isabelle,” her mother hissed. “Why not?”

“Oh, lots of reasons. They’re unreliable, they’re conniving, they’re fake... there’s more. Do you have an hour to spare?”

Her mother gave her a stony glare before throwing up her hands. “I give up. You talk to her, Jon.” She turned and walked back into the kitchen.

“Well, that was an encouraging speech,” Isabelle mumbled.

“Think not those faithful who praise all thy words and actions, but those who kindly reprove thy faults. Socrates.”

Yet another wisdom from her father’s endless supply. She squinted her eyes and cocked her head to the right. “So what the hell does that mean?”

“Izzy,” he warned.

She sighed. “Heck. What the heck does that mean?”

He set his paper down and lowered his feet to the floor. He faced her, elbows on knees. He was wearing his lecture face. She tossed her book aside and locked eyes and ears open.

“It all boils down to the truth. Wouldn’t you rather hear that instead of sweet lies, even if it hurts a little? Just tell it like it is, Isabelle,” he said, wagging his index finger at her. “Don’t try to sugarcoat it. People want, no, make that need, the Truth, not some sweet, easy-to-swallow imitation of the truth.”

“Jonathan! Not this again! It’s got nothing to do with her!” Her mother had returned to the living room, much to the surprise of the father and daughter. “You’re really stuck on that, aren’t you? Honestly, you two are just alike. I just don’t get it.” That said, she left the room for good. Her footsteps thudded lightly as she walked upstairs.

They remained quiet for a moment, neither wanting to speak first. Finally Isabelle broke the silence. “I get it. Go on.”

He nodded, looking relieved, and proceeded to explain to her, little by little and in great detail, why the lack of veracity in the human race would eventually lead to its demise.
She nodded each time he paused for reassurance; not bothering to tell him that he had just discussed this with her quite thoroughly last Thursday. Maybe no one else was willing to listen, but she was, and that was all that mattered.

The wall was made of cement blocks, reminiscent of an old college dorm room or a random classroom at the high school. Although, strangely enough, the blocks were square. She couldn’t recall ever seeing perfect lines of square cinder block; they were usually rectangular in fashion. Square. Probably a foot on a side. One square foot in area. It would be easy to figure how big the wall was, she decided, with those square blocks. Starting in the lower left-hand corner where the wall began, she started to count.

One, two, three, four...

She reached the end of the first row, and the last block had been cruelly cut in half. No, not even half, but more than a third. Two fifths, maybe. All along the doorframe where the wall ended, up to the ceiling, was a tall, thin line of vertically sliced blocks. She debated on how to include them in the count, and decided to leave that line for the end.

“Isabelle, I’m glad I found you. I’d like to talk to you for a second.”

_Not again._ She reluctantly looked away from her task. The soft, barely masculine voice came from a middle-aged man squatting just to her left. She first saw the shine of his head, an oily beacon of light peeping through the thin strands of his combover. A thick set of gray wire-rimmed glasses perched atop his pug nose. A wide bristle-brush mustache formed an inverted V over his lips, and stretched as he spoke.

“How do you feel? He asked, shifting his weight to accommodate his belly. _Why does everyone keep asking me that?_ She chose not to respond.

“I know this is a tough time for you. Your father was a good man, a good professor, and a good friend of mine.”

How lovely. And I suppose now you’ll have to relate some heartwarming tale about him.

“Why, I remember the first day he walked into my office, I think he had to borrow a stapler or something—”

She shut him out, staring mutely. The man was familiar, and she had a nagging feeling that she should at least know his name. But then again, most middle-aged men tended to look and act just alike, especially her father’s colleagues, so she could very well be mistaken. But still...

“Who are you?” she interrupted. The man smiled, allowing his lips to curve up enough until a thin row of neglected teeth could be seen. She shuddered.

“I’m Bryan Maze. We’ve met before, but it’s been a while, so I guess you don’t remember. I worked with your father. Anyway, your uncle sent me to find you... the service is about to start.”

“The service,” she repeated slowly. That meant a eulogy. A speech, given by some stranger whose religious occupation bade him do so, full of nice words and half-truths. The preacher didn’t know her father, since they never actually attended church, yet he would tell the world the man’s life story as told to him by others. The Disney version of it, anyway. It would be cleaned and bleached, all the dark blotches removed, then buffed and polished to eliminate irregularities and rough edges. A flawless, shiny, smooth life. An illusion of perfection. A fallacy.

Jonathan Atkins was human, and humans are not perfect. Ergo, he was not perfect.

And he would have hated this deceptive ritual.

“It’s been such a nice ceremony, hasn’t it?” murmured the man. “So beautiful. And all the flowers!” He clucked sympathetically. “He really meant a lot to everyone here.”

“He would have hated this.”

Silence. Then, “Excuse me?”

“This. This stupid play that’s being put on for the world, where we’re all just acting our part until the storm passes. They should charge a fucking admission to this circus.” She leaned forward, clutching the hem of her skirt. Her voice rose. “Tomorrow we’ll all congratulate ourselves for never letting down our guard, never telling people how we really felt or what we really remembered about him. He would have hated it, _condemned_ it, even...” She paused for breath, her face burning. “That’s why we never went to funerals. He couldn’t stand the hypocrisy. Why doesn’t anyone get this?”

He leaned back warily, as one might lean from a fire that burns too brightly. “Well, young lady, I think if your father were here right now, he would certainly appreciate all that we’ve—”

“No he wouldn’t!!!” she shouted, her hoarse voice bouncing off the white, square-blocked wall, giving it a power she didn’t know it was capable of. “That’s bullshit! If he was such a good friend to you then you would know!!!”

He stared at her, clearly irritated by her candor, before struggling to a standing position. He adjusted his dark gray jacket and straightened his tie, giving her a meaningful glare.

“If you’ll excuse me, I am going to go back inside for the service that was so thoughtfully provided.”

“Good riddance. And enjoy the show.”

Thirty blocks across. Eleven blocks up and down. That made 330 blocks. Three hundred and thirty square feet, with a little extra, if you counted that annoying line of sliced blocks. Eleven of those. Eleven times two fifths was... Hell, she never could get the hang of fractions.

She reached for her purse again, digging around inside until her hand grasped the package she was looking for. She pulled out the...
She let her head roll back and thump gently on the blocks behind her. She could hear the deep, rolling voice of the preacher, back in the sanctuary, begin his remarks. Amid his mumbles and the sound of her own breath, she caught another noise. Footsteps.

Third time’s a charm.

She turned her head to the left, waiting to see the next ambassador they’d sent for her. A moment later, he appeared. Tall, dark-haired, and surprisingly young. He was wearing a red button-down shirt and loose Khakis. Her eyes followed his form as he turned, stopped, and studied her. Shrugging, he walked over and slouched down the wall beside her. His knees were drawn up to his chest, eyes closed, right hand loosely holding his smoke. The end of it burned bright orange, and ashes started to visibly. He seemed in no hurry to speak, and her curiosity nearly got the best of her.

He didn’t laugh or ask why she wanted to know. Others came in their place.

He glanced over at her questioningly. She attempted to avert her gaze by examining her hand, the floor, the wall, anything in the opposite direction. But he was patient, and eventually he won out. She turned to face him and he stuck out his hand.

“Eric Blackburn. Former student.”

She studied his face for a long moment before slowly raising her right hand and clasping it with his.

“Isabelle Atkins. Daughter.”

His eyes widened a little and he nodded, as if no further explanation was necessary.

“He touched the lives of everyone he met...”

She snorted. Eric chuckled and spoke. “I remember once, this guy kept falling asleep and snoring in class... Dr. Atkins had woken him once already, but the guy was asleep again... he got so pissed he threw an eraser at him.”

Isabelle smiled and leaned forward, picking absenty at the sleeve of her blouse. “He never could remember their anniversary.”

“He lost my midterm paper once.”

“He was always late.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Yeah, he was.”

She settled back and relaxed, placing her hands in her lap and ignoring the shudders through the floor. A group of soft, synchronized voices began reciting the Lord’s prayer.

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”

She shivered at the eerie, unsettling sound. She imagined all the blue and black suits and dresses with their heads lowered, chanting the words. Her father’s first captive audience. What a shame it had to come now.

“Amen.” Sniffles. One broken wail. The sound of shoes scraping against cheap blue carpet. It was over.

Eric squashed his cigarette on the ground. The ashes scattered and danced across the floor. Gray against dark blue. “Thanks for the light,” he said as he stood up, brushing away stray debris from his pants. Her gaze settled on his old brown boots as he started to walk away.

“Wait.” She clambered to her feet, stomping her cigarette and adjusting her skirt at the same time. He turned, his face open and questioning.

She hesitated. “I’m done. Wait for me.”

He smiled then; easy, sincere, honest. Her own lips followed suit as she walked after him, glancing back at the wall only once as she left.