

## FROM THE INSTRUCTOR

Alan Shain's essay "Odette's" was composed for WR 100 "Creative Nonfiction," a special WR section associated with the "Creative Composition" cluster of courses within the larger WR curriculum. In addition to studying the writing of renowned essayists such as James Baldwin, E. B. White, Jamaica Kincaid, Adrienne Rich, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, students had to compose their own creative nonfiction stories, centered on real memories and experiences, but directed in a way that also underscored a larger point or idea. Alan's "Odette" is a masterful example of the power of Creative Nonfiction as a genre, but it also highlights some of the unique challenges of writing Creative Nonfiction pieces. As opposed to a more traditional academic essay built upon a central claim supported through analysis of evidence and engagement with argument sources, Alan had to write about his experience in a way that seemed more conversational, though not too informal. This required inventing a logical and controlled structure for his essay without recourse to the typical rhetorical moves of academic writing. Alan also struggled with—and succeeded in resolving—some of the same challenges that all essay writers encounter, such as how to introduce and conclude an essay. Alan ultimately decided to avoid a clichéd, overly sentimental ending, and instead to finish on the sound of the ringing phone. The image is powerful because it is restrained. It takes one step towards the reader, but invites the reader to take a step as well, giving the reader something to think about even after the essay has finished. In this way, "Odette's" also represents a wonderful irony of creative nonfiction writing: the most intimate and personal essays can also be the most universal and relatable precisely because of—rather than in spite of—the specificity of their details.

Christopher McVey

WR 100: Creative Nonfiction: Personal, Collective, and Public Memory

## FROM THE WRITER

Ironically, Odette has never read this essay nor heard any attempted translation from English to French of its contents: she claims that hearing about herself bores her. Therefore, I never asked my grandmother how she wanted to be described in an essay. While our relationship obviously mattered to me, I had a difficult time in the drafted versions making the deep personal connection between my grandmother and me seem exciting to people who have never met Odette. I hope that I described her accurately and that I relayed the enthrallment of every moment with my grandmother into my writing. This essay is best read while sitting before a balcony table: one hand holding the printed paper and the other gripping a cup of tea. So, sit back and let me bring you a sip of Odette's.

**ALAN SHAIN** is a rising sophomore in Boston University's College of Arts and Sciences, studying Chemistry. He was born and raised in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, but took a gap year in the Middle East. Alan cannot thank Professor Christopher McVey enough for his unending encouragement and his deep inspiration. Alan considers this piece as much Professor McVey's as it is his own.

ALAN SHAIN

## ODETTE'S

There's an apartment on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor of a high-rise by the water, situated in Israel but not actually located in The Middle East. Whenever I drag my luggage to my grandmother's apartment, Mami Odette (as I call her) finds ways to hand me French biscottes smeared with butter, jars of homemade jam, and slices of lemon-saturated Poisson. These foods always accompany nana mint tea with some tarot cards used in order to play a well-known family game. Odette claims that the French kings of old played this game, but by this point our family has altered most of the rules. The apartment itself has three bedrooms although my grandmother lives alone. There's a generous two-person kitchen and a small clothes-drying balcony. She also uses a larger sitting balcony, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, upon which she eats a light breakfast every morning after exercise.

If one were to classify the apartment's style, one could say the apartment had a European layout with shades of 1930's North-African culture. Upon further examination, the pictures and trinkets are really trophies of Odette's adventures. She has a picture from the time she traveled to Thailand and allowed an elephant to pick her up by the trunk. She has a picture of her and her mother standing before the grave of my oldest-known ancestor who moved from Spain to Morocco during the 1500s. She also proudly displays varyingly large photographs of her favorite grandchild, my sister, on the mantle, the bookshelf, the living room, her bedroom, and in other little corners of her miniature France.

On the rare occasions that I come to my grandmother's house, I break my teeth on the broken bits of French I can recall without having practiced as she asks me questions, encouraging me to speak her language. Regardless of how hard I try, we ultimately switch to Freebrew: a mixture of French and Hebrew in which I am able to supplement my broken French with my more confident Hebrew and she can reinforce her broken Hebrew with a slow, soft-spoken French. As the visit progresses, my French improves just enough to have a real conversation. By that point, the visit usually ends and I return home to forget whatever pieces of culture my grandmother attempted to bestow on me.

I remember one visit in particular last year. I travel to Israel for a gap year to volunteer in various communities and to experience the land. When I arrive in the country, I drop off my luggage in an apartment I am renting in Jerusalem. My grandmother calls me and invites me to her house. She tells me in French: you are going to come every weekend. I tell her, "yes, of course." I know in my heart that as an eighteen-year-old on his own in a foreign country full of opportunity, I will probably not spend too much time at her house. But, as a gesture of good faith, I knock on my grandmother's apartment door the second Friday after I arrive.

The visit transpires just like all the other visits: I can barely speak and we switch into Freebrew until I am comfortable enough to slowly ease my way into basic French. On Saturday night, I escape to

downtown Tel Aviv, dancing the night away with some friends in a club whose name we can't really remember.

That summer I only visit her once more. Fall feels the same as summer and I find myself preoccupied with meeting new people and dealing with the excitements of living on my own. Despite the Middle East's warm climate, some moments feel very cold. Particularly after a hard day working the ambulance shift and a long night out on the town, I feel longing at the 5 a.m. sunrise-buzz. I miss home. Not in the sense I want to go back at all—every new day brings the best day of my life—but in the sense that all these new responsibilities of laundry, cooking, buying toilet paper, and the late nights only matched by earlier morning alarms have overwhelmed me only a little: I feel like the arrow of a compass thrown between magnets and I can't decide which way to turn. During one of these particular moments, I decide to turn to my grandmother. On a last-minute decision on a Friday afternoon, I hop on a bus and tap some numbers into my cell phone, “Mami Odette, *j'arrive ce soir pour dîner. C'est bien?*”

An hour later, I stand at the door to my grandmother's house, and find a biscotte in my hand, smeared with homemade jam and creamy butter. Since I have practiced my French a little, the whole weekend my grandmother and I speak French. We actually start talking. Not just about what I should buy at the store for her to prepare (which is usually what we talk about), but about the real things. At least, what seems real enough to her and about which she cares enough to ask. Odette asks me whom I'm dating, how my shifts are going on the ambulance, and if I need to take any food back to my apartment. The exchange lasts only a few minutes, but its magnitude extends far more than its duration: it is perhaps our first real conversation.

Over the course of the weekend, Odette banters with me in French: She has a very distinct, masculine sense of humor. In particular, I ask her if she's “excité” to go swimming at the pool and she tells me that at her age, she no longer gets “*excité*.” Later in the day, I ask her “*Ou est-ce que je vais coucher ce soir*”—where am I sleeping tonight (in which bed)? She smirks, “*Pas avec moi*”—not with me. By the end of the weekend, she tells me that I can invite some friends over if I want for dinner one day. Two weeks later, I bring two of my French-American friends and we have dinner on the balcony as Odette makes lighthearted jokes about my poor French to the laughter of my friends. I smirk and answer in a poor accent that I do actually understand her.

Yet I want to understand more. I visit frequently and ask her questions. Why did she move from Morocco to France? Why did she leave my grandfather? Why did she move from France to Israel at the age of seventy-five? We have longer tea-filled chats and I eat more salmon and tilapia than the fishermen can haul to port. My grandmother recalls bribing her brothers to let her and her sisters go out partying as teenagers in Morocco. She puts her hands to her neck as if she's choking to transmit to me the feeling of an oppressive marriage. Odette lays cards on the living-room table, reenacting the conversation with her friends that galvanized her to leave the country in which she lived for most of her life. One day, I sit on the couch, computer at hand, and I ask Odette for the Wi-Fi password. “Odette1932.” I suddenly realize that's when she was born.

I readily devour each new fact along with the jelly and biscottes of the morning breakfasts. I imagine the hair salon that she opened in France. I see the wine grapes she planted back at her home in southern France as she describes the vines growing along a fence. I learn about the mysterious disappearance of my uncle Gilbert, who grew up reckless and managed to stay that way his whole

life. I attend my second cousin's circumcision, a major event in Judaism for a newborn boy, and meet more than fifty of my extended family members alongside my grandmother. I observe as Odette acts as the matriarch of the clan, directing conversation with an authority that only the wise and powerful possess.

These moments accrue into a trust. Through each conversation I build a better environment for Odette to share her knowledge with me. At the end of this yearlong visit, I contemplate staying and actually moving to this wonderful country that has fostered the most cinematic episodes of my life. My grandmother sits me down and we discuss. She explains to me that life is hard here. As much as I can perform CPR in perfect Hebrew, the everyday life-activities in a foreign country require more than fluency with a defibrillator. Odette explains to me that without money I will not be taken seriously. But if I go to college back in the United States and become wealthy, then all my life, people will open doors and say "Mr. Shain."

I based my decision to return to America on the conversation that I had in Odette's apartment. Now that I'm in college, I find myself rushing around campus to the point where I often skip breakfast. In those moments, I hunger for a biscotte with jam, a freshly cooked fish, and some tea. Sometimes when I hear French around campus, I miss my grandmother.

After a hard night's work writing a college paper, I gaze at the clock. It is 2 a.m. in America, but the sun has only risen across the sea. I open my phone and dial a familiar number. The phone rings.