

watching her forget their life together. I think all my grandfather ever wanted was to be left alone with his wife—a goal he'd finally accomplished after more than 40 years of marriage, when they retired from Houston to his family's Tennessee home.

In this way my grandparents reminded me of the Reagans, one of those couples who are so gaga for each other that there is no room for the kids. It's nobody's fault. It's just that perfect couples rarely have happy families. They have to have children, because they love each other too much not to make something of it. But then, the honeymoon never ends, and who brings their children on a honeymoon? It's like they always say: two's company, and three's an angry kid like Patti Davis, desperate for attention, with a complex about being shoved outside the magic circle.

Except that in our case, Patti Davis was my mother—a Scarlett O'Hara for the silicon age, with a chest as big as her mouth and hair. Between these two genteel Southern ladies, our family became an Old West town: It just wasn't big enough for both of them.

Which meant that my grandfather, Alfred, adoring JoAnn as he did, not only stopped speaking to his daughter, he even stopped speaking about her, at least with me. Until the day when we were finally forced to accept the fact of JoAnn's Alzheimer's and its awful progression.

The more JoAnn forgot, the more often Alfred asked me to visit. And at the end of one of these Tennessee weekends, as my grandfather wound his Buick through the dark hills on the way to the airport, he suddenly blurted, "Sonny, I think it's time your mother came home for a visit."

I was too surprised to say anything. Then he repeated, "I think it's time your mother came home."

"I'll make it happen," I mumbled.

"Good," he said, tapping the wheel. "It's time."

Of course, I had no idea how I would make it happen. Fortunately, my mother—who, for many years, had been no stranger to a Bloody Mary—was newly sober, and I took advantage of that narrow window of Alcoholics Anonymous time before making amends becomes a crashing bore. All that summer, I begged her long distance. I swore that if she would only visit her parents one more time, everything would be different. Finally I played my ace: I asked her to visit them in Tennessee for my birthday in September.

"Damn it," she screeched. "So now if I don't go, I'll be ruining your birthday? Fine. I'll do it. But prepare yourself for disaster."

"There won't be any disaster," I said.

Now that my grandmother had, in a way, disappeared, she was fully present to my mother for perhaps the first time in their relationship.

"Oh, really? Give me one good reason why things will be different this time."

"Alzheimer's," I answered.

For my grandfather and me, having to witness JoAnn's Alzheimer's had been agonizing—like watching *The Miracle Worker* backward. Every day seemed accompanied by a new limitation. But for my grandmother, the disease had seemed liberating. For the first time in all the years I'd known her, she seemed truly happy.

Imagine: to be freed from your memory, to have every awful thing that ever happened to you wiped away—and not just your past, but your worries about the future, too. Because with no sense of time or memory, past and future cease to exist, along with all sense of loss and regret. Not to mention grudges and hurt feelings, arguments and embarrassments.

And that's the fantasy, isn't it? To have your record cleared. To be able not to merely forget, but to expunge your unhappy childhood, or unrequited love, or rocky marriage from your memory. To start over again.

There had always been an element of existential fury to my grandmother's barbed wit, concerning her lost time and missed chances. But as her Alzheimer's advanced, she forgot to be angry. And she seemed healthier, too: her pace quickened, her complexion brightened, her hair thickened. And with my help and her husband's credit card, even her wardrobe improved. Her transformation was magical and unmistakable.

It was certainly unmistakable to my mother on that bracing September day when my grandparents and I picked her up at the Nashville airport. "Look, JoAnn," Alfred said, "it's Jessica."

"Isn't that funny," said JoAnn, before embracing my mother. "That's my daughter's name, too."

My mother forced a smile and shot me a wary look that abruptly softened once we got to the Buick and my grandmother reached for her hand. "Tell me all about yourself, darling," she said. "I want to know everything about you."

All through my birthday dinner that evening, JoAnn positively doted on her daughter—beaming sweetly and patting her hand. This behavior unsettled my mother, who afterward made a theatrical production of rooting through the closet in her bedroom.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Looking for space pods," she said.

"Who are those people, Robert? And what have they done with my mother? I keep thinking I must be in a blackout. That I must be drunk in a ditch somewhere, and when I wake up I'll have the hangover of a lifetime. Because believe me, if that nice old lady had been my mother, I'd never have left home."

During the following week, the starchy blue autumn skies remained clear, and so did the irony. Now that my grandmother had, in a way, disappeared, she was fully present to my mother for perhaps the first time in their relationship. Now that she was all but unreachable, she was finally available. Each evening, as JoAnn scooted close at dinner, my mother found the nearness less nerve-racking.

On the last day, as we were leaving for the airport, my grandfather kissed us goodbye. Soft black cows strode serenely on the hillside. Suddenly JoAnn grabbed onto the lapels of my mother's jacket, as if she were about to shake her.

My mother looked rattled, but then JoAnn said: "Thank you for coming, Jessica. I want you to know how much it means to me. I want you to know that I know we've never been close. And I know that's been mostly my fault. I'm not sure how much time I've got. But more than anything, I want to have a shot at spending it with you. It's so important. I mean, after all, Jessica, we're sisters."

I groaned, then looked over to see my tough mother crying.

"Close enough, Mama," she said.

Robert Leleux '03 MA '13 is the author of two books, *The Memoirs of a Beautiful Boy* and *The Living End: A Memoir of Forgetting and Forgiving*, the latter of which tells the story of his grandmother's Alzheimer's and his family's reunion in more detail. His essays and articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The American Prospect*. A Texas native, he now lives in New York.

Joann and Jessica's relationship continued to flourish until Joann passed away in August 2010. Jessica is currently a student in the women's history graduate program at SLU.

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One student's crusade to bring composting to Sarah Lawrence.

WORM FRONT

By Katharine Reece MFA '12
Photos by Chris Taggart

A FEW DAYS AFTER SPRING BREAK

his sophomore year, Eli Colasante '13 was walking to his room in Slonim Woods when he heard firefighters bellowing. A trail of prospective students on an admission tour shuffled by, looking bewildered as the fire alarm wailed. Colasante wasn't concerned. The odd fire alarm is nothing new on campus, and he was probably engrossed in thoughts of the Red Wigglers and decaying food scraps he kept in a bin in his room. Composting had absorbed most of his attention for quite some time.

Then his cell phone started ringing. It was Larry Hoffman, the director of public safety, who informed Colasante that the firefighters were actually in his room. His compost had started to ferment, and the noxious gases it emitted had set off the alarm. Hoffman told Colasante to remove the bin and its accompanying worm population immediately.

Instead, Colasante waved merrily at the prospective students, informed them that he was a keen composter, and invited them to come visit the plastic bins he'd set up in his room. He didn't intend to follow Hoffman's instructions. He decided to break the rules because from his perspective, the rules needed to change.

A few days later, five minutes before class, Colasante received an e-mail notifying him that his room would be inspected shortly,

He began surreptitiously composting in his room with scraps he pulled from the garbage.

and his compost and worms would be removed if he hadn't already disposed of them. He hadn't, of course. He loped over to Kober parking lot to retrieve his banana-yellow, fuel-efficient Mini Cooper, snagged the two 18-gallon containers containing his beloved Red Wigglers, put the bins in the trunk of his car, and arrived at class just a few minutes late.

But it was a temporary solution at best. The Office of Student Affairs placed Colasante on housing probation, which meant he wouldn't be allowed to live on campus over the summer as planned. For two and a half years, he had been trying to start a composting program at the College. Now he would have to commute from Manhattan in order to keep it up. While he knew the administrators were simply doing their jobs, the punishment felt like a dismissal of all his work.

Plus he still didn't know what he was going to do with his worms.



Colasante grew up in Gainesville, Florida, on 104 acres of lush forest. His mother was a vegetarian ex-hippie and family physician who raised four boys on her own, and she taught him how to solve complex problems using simple solutions. "Her patients would

complain about being overweight or having diabetes, and would expect her to prescribe a pill that could magically fix all of it," he says. Their problems were complicated, but the solutions were not: quit smoking and drinking soda, exercise, and eat more vegetables.

The problem Colasante observed when he arrived at Sarah Lawrence was how much food was being thrown away.

Food makes up around a third of America's waste stream; even though it's biodegradable, discarded items can end up sitting unchanged for decades. In one of Colasante's many conference projects on composting and soil health, he estimated Sarah Lawrence's food waste at a hundred tons per year. It seemed like a problem with a simple solution: take the refuse and make it into a resource.

In composting, microorganisms—or, in Colasante's case, worms—feast on organic matter, breaking it down into a rich fertilizer that can be potent enough to cure dying plants. He says the process is more like cooking than science, though, and missteps can birth a number of mysterious smells and undesirable creatures (some with worrisome names, such as Black Soldier larvae). But at heart, composting is a fairly undemanding process: let the materials sit, stir occasionally, and wait for nature to do its thing.

Colasante started talking about composting with Sarah Lawrence staff. Michael Rengers '78, then director of operations and facilities, told him that a number of students had attempted to compost at the College before, but none had succeeded. The main reason, Rengers said, was that in the face of skepticism and a dearth of resources, they had given up. (Either that, or they had no successors after graduation.) Colasante realized that his success would depend on a dogged refusal to quit.

Colasante didn't gain much traction that first year, and he decided to take a year off and go to China, where he got a job teaching English and working on an organic farm. He says he decided on China mainly because he didn't know anything about it. "One time, I tried to say, 'I want to wash my clothes,' and accidentally said, 'I want to wash your wife,'" he recalls. But it took him only a few months to learn how to speak Mandarin fluently. When he wasn't teaching, he took long bike trips into the



Then the fire alarm incident happened. Colasante's worms did

rural countryside, where he talked to people in villages and asked questions about their mud-brick homes and greenhouses. The windows of their greenhouses all faced south, and Colasante used them as a compass.

Back at Sarah Lawrence for his sophomore year, he sent scores of e-mails to faculty, trustees, administrators, and alumni, trying to garner support for his vision. "Composting at SLC is a move towards sustainability in the face of an unpredictable future," he would say. "We make a lot of food scraps which cost money to transport out. In the future, who knows what the price will be of oil or disposing of food, or of getting fertilizer or peat moss? This is an investment in the future so we can rely on local resources." He also began surreptitiously composting in his room with scraps he pulled from the garbage while working for AVI Fresh in Bates. He added worms that he'd transported from Florida in a bucket full of dirt. Worms can devour up to half their body weight in food scraps daily, and they excrete "black gold"—highly concentrated, nutrient-dense fertilizer.

The administrators Colasante met with explained that Sarah Lawrence didn't have the space or the resources to maintain a composting facility. Only one person responded (favorably, at least) to his many e-mails: Trustee Vicki Ford '60 MSEd '87, who asked to see his business plan. Colasante quickly obliged, and Ford offered him a small grant. He requested a loan instead, insisting that he wanted to make his operation profitable and pay her back. With the money he received, he built a larger composting bin, which looks like a white refrigerator turned on its side, in Ford's yard in Bronxville. For over a year, Colasante and some friends visited her house every week to add to and tend the bin.

Vicki Ford and Eli Colasante examine a bucket of top-notch compost at FinalPitch.



not fare well in the back of his car, and he was devastated when they perished, shriveled by the heat of summer. But he made the most of his housing probation by visiting composting facilities at colleges and community gardens around the region, with the help of a Seidelman Grant for Activism Work from SLC. When he returned to campus for his junior year, he had new ideas about how to refine his approach. The first step was to get other students involved and create an official compost club sanctioned by the Sarah Lawrence Activities Council. Colasante also negotiated with administrators to get his bin out of Vicki Ford's yard and onto campus. In December 2011, he was allowed to move the bin to the lawn of Warren Green, the ecologically oriented student residence.

"I would not be surprised if Eli one day becomes the Bill Gates of composting," says Larry Hoffman, who first encountered Colasante when he visited the Student Life Committee and proposed selling clothes-drying racks to save energy in campus residences—a project that Hoffman helped him implement. "He has to be one of the staunchest supporters of the environment we have had at the college in my 14 years here. He always found ways around the accepted way of doing things, and just won't take no for an answer."

Because the operations staff can't directly monitor Colasante's process, his compost can't be

used on campus grounds. But he now runs a business, Eli's Worm Compost (eliscompost.net), packaging his compost in salvaged bags from a nearby Dunkin' Donuts and buckets rescued from Dumpsters. Though his profits are slim, he has applied for a business license, and he pays taxes. This spring, he participated

"I would not be surprised if Eli one day becomes the Bill Gates of composting."

in SLCEEDs, an entrepreneurship program that launched on campus in December 2012. He presented his business plan at PitchFest in February and FinalPitch in May, during which he carried a bucket of compost onto the stage and attempted to sell it to the judges.

Vicki Ford watched Colasante graduate in the spring, and she returned all his loan payments

as a graduation gift and forgave him the difference. This summer he went back to China on a Meredith Fonda Russell grant—to study composting facilities, of course. Most people he talks to about his post-graduation plans assume he will abandon composting at Sarah Lawrence, but he doesn't consider that an option. "The reason

we don't already have a composting facility is because there isn't someone willing to remain working on it long enough, other than me," Colasante says with a modest shrug. "In other words, no one is willing to endure every setback, every mistake, every failure—and endure for however much time it takes to guarantee success is the one and only option." His vision is a fully realized, self-supporting

composting facility that recycles all food waste at the College. It's an ambitious dream, and there are more obstacles to contend with before it could become reality. But somehow that dream doesn't seem quite so implausible as it used to. With Colasante around, anything could happen. [↪](#)

Katharine Reece MFA '12 grew up on a llama farm in northwest Montana, where she did her best to avoid the worms her brother used for the dual purposes of fishing and tormenting her.