

Julianne Johnson wrote prolifically in the fiction workshop I taught during Fall 2004. "911" is one of several strong pieces she wrote. She writes often of family relationships. Her settings can be everyday ones, such as the story submitted, or more exotic, such as a canoeing trip on a remote river in Belize. I chose "911" because it best exemplifies the heart of her work—a woman's struggle to make sense of her life and make something of it despite a terrifying situation.

We hear about Joanna, the protagonist of "911" all the time. We read statistics about women like her all the time. It's difficult for some people to understand why women stay in intolerable situations. In this story we get inside Joanna's mind. Julianne demonstrates finesse in putting us, the readers, in the moment when Joanna is under attack or noticing how her daughter is being affected.

I was very pleased with the progress Julianne made as a writer in the class. She has found writing as a creative force, and I know that she has many more stories to tell and write. She worked well with this story, revising and re-visioning it, and we even talked a bit more about it, which resulted in a few changes, for the draft she gave me to submit.

I'm not entirely sure which category to place this in. She is a graduate student doing creative work. The Sampson category doesn't explicitly mention creative works, as the undergraduate category does. So I will encourage the judges to have a debate about this.

Karen Loeb

Julianne Johnson

English 411/611

“911”

I open the letter, the long white envelope with nine yellow legal pages. On it I see his writing. I feel I can go no further than the greeting. It doesn't start with “dear” - only with my name and a comma. It's addressed from the Rehab Center, ...our town. I had known for six weeks that he wasn't far away, but the information sat at the edge of my awareness. I think they say we can create our own amnesia – denial in a pure subconscious form. I had been remarkably successful.

As I open the letter, I realize how well I'd been doing it. I'd walked through the last weeks in a half dream state, no longer aware that he ever really existed. But this yellow letter is reality. Written with red ink, perhaps with an edit or grading pen, it scrawls in my hands as if red worms are eating their way out of the paper. It has the date, 3-1-91 - even the time, 7 pm.

I walk toward my apartment door. But then, absently, just continue walking around the building, folding and unfolding the letter. I finally come back to my own front step. Life seems to be some strange kind of circle. It must have been my time to come back to the beginning – back to reality.

I read the first line...*“For the last 3 days you have been constantly on my mind...so I decided to sit here and talk with you by writing down my thoughts and feelings.”*

It is one of those times when I know I should be reaching into my mind and calling 911. Doing something to prevent my mind from completing the circle. I could have guessed what the letter would say.

His counselor had called me earlier and said that the rehab had not been successful – that he was so manipulative he had slid through all the exercises and knew exactly what to say and write. The counselor said he was also writing letters for others in his group – perfect letters, to help them get out. The committee had met to decide how to deal with him, and had decided they would never accomplish anything. He would be released by the weekend and they would try no further. They had also decided against a referral to another facility, feeling it would also be worthless – “asocial personality.” The counselor had no advice or suggestions.

And now, here, in my hand, is my own perfect letter – the letter to show me that he is a changed man, a contrite and humble man, a reformed and corrected man. I was some step in his 12-step program, and my “response would be significant to his future.”

But what of my future? This is about me, you see.

Somehow I’d hoped that my life would someday become easier. I always hope it, even to this day.

I had left him, escaped with my daughter one dark October night - had extricated myself from an abusive marriage. But he is still here. My circle is unbroken - whether it was by God’s choice or God’s error.

I’d been married to him for five and a half years. You may want to ask me why I stayed - and I know you’ll never believe the reasons. I thought that some morning I’d wake up and things would be better – that my smile or my spaghetti, or something, would do some magical trick. And, on the practical side, for a long time I somehow felt I couldn’t pull my young daughter out of what appeared to be a new stable family. An

innocent five year old with pale blond curls, she'd carried our tiny ring basket at the wedding, its lid covered with pink roses. But, finally, it all boils down to a harsh, basic common denominator - finances. No money, no recourse.

This man I married – he had been so excited to meet me that he was unable to talk – unable to hold even a simple conversation with me – couldn't even stay in the same room with me. If I entered a room, he would exit to a different one. The friends who had asked us both to dinner to meet didn't know what to make of it. I spent most of the evening talking with the wife, who explained that she thought he would be a nice person to date. Finally as I was about to leave, he handed me a packet of matches with his number on the cover, and asked if I would call later that night. Oh - and me, the fool - I did.

He was thrilled - ecstatic actually – when I agreed to go out with him. And later, months later, that I would accept his proposal of marriage. We married too quickly, before I had a chance to find out who or what he was. He was kind and generous, and attentive and full of dreams, a respected school administrator with ideas for change and no fear in promoting them. As an administrator, it was his job to wield control and he did it well. It took two years before I finally knew he was an alcoholic, he hid it so well. I rarely saw him with a drink.

It took much less time to find out what he was capable of – abuse without reason.

The yellow pages blow in the wind, crinkling, making me take notice and I read further. *“I was hoping you would call,”* he writes, *“and let me know you were thinking of me. You should feel yourself a very fortunate person. I can't remember the last time I*

have sat down and wrote to anyone. Forgive me if I ramble. The feelings I have in my heart for you are being expressed through this pen. I don't know how this is going to sound...it might be the last birthday card or anniversary card I ever give you...then again it may be the first of many to come."

One night, a few months after we'd gotten married, he came home while I was making dinner. My daughter was sleeping over at a friend's. I didn't hear the door click - or the hello I'd become accustomed to hearing. He didn't enter the house immediately and I became puzzled, wondering what things he had to do in the garage first. When he entered the kitchen, his eyes were darting like an animal on the prowl. His body was tense. When I went over to greet him with a kiss, he'd grabbed me around the neck. He shoved me against the wall, then spun me around. I screamed and ran into the living room to get away. He came after me, shoved me against the wall again, then spun me and shoved me down onto the couch. He made a guttural sound suddenly, and left - never said a word. Just left.

I lay there for several minutes, wondering what had just happened to me, trying to figure out if it had been real, listening to determine where he was. I finally heard the click of the garage door and hoped that meant he had left the house. I continued to lie on the couch - waiting for my heart to stop pounding and my body to stop shaking.

I wipe the water from my eyes - they couldn't be tears. It must be the bright sun. He writes, "*I know you want to be assured in your mind that what has happened in the past won't ever happen again. I know you want to be sure everything is in place so your*

daughter will be safe, comfortable, secure and loved. Know that I can only regain your trust and confidence through my continued improvement, through my actions and my consistent behavior. This, I know, will take time and won't always be easy."

I drop the letter. It's yellow pages flutter on the grass like flapping birds, surprised while greedily eating some poor, weak prey.

I press my hands over my eyes, my face, press them deeply against my head. Oh, could I go on? A sick feeling in my stomach makes me sit down on the step. Behind is the security of the front door and our safe, little apartment – big enough for two, my daughter and me.

After his first attack, I approached him boldly - no, with naïve hope. It was a few days later. I talked with him about my needs for love and security. And I told my thoughts about what our marriage meant to me – what I hoped it could be like, how I hoped we could be for each other. I asked if there was anything he'd like changed. In response, he only said, rather harshly I thought, "If you want my love, you'll have to earn it."

A few days later, it happened again. He spooked me by coming at me from behind. He spun me around to face him, then began slamming his hand against my sternum, pushing me backward toward the kitchen sink. I ducked under his arm and again ran into the living room, screaming, "You stay away from me, stay away from me!" Again he had that strange look in his eyes and walked tensely, slightly crouched, as if he were a cougar stalking prey. When I continued screaming, he finally left.

He went into the bedroom, took off his suit, tie, dress shoes - and put on jeans, boots and a flannel shirt. I could see him in the reflection of the mirror in the hall. I ducked out of sight as he went out to the garage. Soon the smell of his pipe smoke seeped into the house, like invisible clouds of warning. Once a rich, spicy smell of romance, it was now heavy and repulsive, as tobacco that becomes black and slimy from a freeze. It was haunting.

I think about that stinking tobacco smell. It seems to have become imprinted in my nose, or in my mind. I pick up the letter. Like a suspense thriller, I want to know what was in the next paragraph.

“Just remember,” it says, “the past does not equal the future! What I have been like, what I have done to you, the way I have treated you and the ways in which I have attempted to control you were wrong, terribly wrong. I could spend the next several days writing down examples of my very inappropriate and disconcerting actions and behaviors. I don’t want you to think that I am putting it aside and forgetting what I used to be like... Those wounds are very deep and will take a long, long time to heal. The scars of those wounds can be the basis for a newfound life for each of us. As much as it may have hurt, we cannot afford to dwell on the past.”

I have to stop, desperately needing to breathe.

Next he writes, *“So the past will not be forgotten, it will be the factor I use to measure the changes I make in myself as I become the person I want to be.”*

I almost laugh. Something tries to crawl up my trachea and burst into the air – but the sound comes as a sob. He is asking me to trust him, to take him back, to erase my scars. I remember the beginning of my days and nights of fear.

I started watching him closely, the smooth way he talked to others, the guiltless way he took or got what he wanted, the presence he exuded that made people do his bidding, even seek him out. Everyone wanted to hunt with him, fish with him, stop over to see him. He had some fantastic ability to control behind his jagged smile and light-blue, sun-bleached eyes. And, accustomed as he was to his sense of control, he very inconspicuously manipulated people to his wishes. When we were out with others, he just seemed normal. I had thought he was just popular.

I started my nightly prayers, earnestly asking that tomorrow be a new beginning - that things return to normal. I would lie awake - listen to him alternating breathing with grating snores, and try to think of what I must be doing wrong. I asked two close friends if they'd ever noticed that I was doing something that might be aggravating him. They said they'd never seen anything. There were no clues and no answers.

The attacks, the chases, continued. Though I would listen for the sound of his car, sometimes I would miss it. Sometimes I would even miss the door click. He would enter the room and face off to me in his crouched position. If I ignored him and turned around, he would grab me and throw me against the counter, the doorframe or into the living room. The attacks were not sexually motivated. Sometimes he would start with some issue, like a doll of my daughter's accidentally left in the living room, or the fact that his own kids never called. But sometimes they were totally nonverbal.

My hearing became acute as I listened for him. Many days I tried to be outside or visiting with a neighbor when he came home. And many of those days he'd surprise attack me later in the evening. Thankfully, he always did it when my daughter was not at home. His planning was calculated. My heart would race, but more than that, my heart would break.

I spent much time obsessed with thoughts of fear, imagining what he might do next.

During the third summer of our marriage, when my daughter was visiting at her dad's, I started not caring if I woke up in the morning. I had had enough. I had become exhausted from the constant strain of the fear I felt. The abuse happened again and again. There was never a clue when or why.

I would count the calendar days until her return. Fortunately she was always back in two weeks.

Why didn't I leave then? No place to go.

I look at the next paragraph. "*Joanna,*" he writes, "*what a beautiful ***name. It fits you like a wet T shirt – it's vibrant, it's exciting, it's laughter, it's romantic, it's spiritual, it's creative, it's happiness, it's serene and peaceful, it's warm and affectionate, it's honest and tender, it's silly and loving and lovely. I have just expressed how I feel about you. These are the reasons I love you – your smile, your laughter, your energy, your intelligence...*"

Stop! The word yelled at me. If I was so wonderful, then why was I treated so terribly for four years? What is wrong with this picture!

I crushed the letter between my hands.

We started a pattern of not eating together when my young daughter was home. Sadly, at the times we were all together, he'd then be pleasant to me, but would ridicule my daughter. He would screw up his nose and voice and say something like, "what do you have those ugly ribbons in your hair for – think it makes you look prettier?" Or he would tease her about the red spaghetti she'd accidentally dropped on her shirt, or make fun of something she told about her day at school. She always seemed not to notice, perhaps not hear – or she would look at me and I would give her some "knowing look" that let her understand this was teasing. When she was seven, she would sometimes stand as she ate or leave the table mid-meal to disappear into the living room, returning moments later – no evidence for her departure.

There was no reason for her to approach him to play or talk, but she never seemed frightened either. He appeared to tactically know how to keep a distance between them.

One day, sometime in our fourth year, he solemnly told me I'd better see a counselor about my daughter, because she wasn't normal. She didn't act right, she didn't respond to him right. He told me who to see, a psychiatrist to whom he referred parents and school staff. About a week later I met with this man. I explained my daughter and her actions. He eventually asked about my husband – who he was. The psychiatrist sat very silently for many minutes and I could see him struggling with what to say. I expected he was soon to spout some diagnosis that I wouldn't be able to deal with.

He looked at me, a look without blinking, and said..."stay away from him...stay away as much as you can...and keep your daughter away. He has a large emotional wheelchair."

Now I was speechless. I explained I had no money to leave or divorce.

"Then you'll just have to focus on staying healthy - don't give in to his games."

I returned home more frightened than ever.

I began eating with my daughter before he arrived home. I would warn her each night if he was in a good or bad mood, and if she dared come out of her room. I would spend most evenings, after some "talk-time" with him, in her room – a bright, happy, yellow room – and we'd work on homework, read together, play games, laugh, and keep the door shut. He never came to knock or come in.

We would go ride horses at the music teacher's house on weekends. She was a round woman, the kind with a built-in hug. Her features were plain, her hair curly and slightly graying, shoulder-length, sometimes pulled behind her head. I worked as an aide at her school and helped her organize Christmas choir programs. My involvement created another wonderful reason for us to be out of the house. Occasionally we'd chat as she fed the horses. And sometimes she'd find me standing out in the pasture, in the quiet of the horse's bodies, and ask me in for tea.

I open the letter back up. I'm only on page three.

I think of our marriage.

We'd gotten married in the District Attorney's office, a man who happened to go to my church. He'd been very willing and excited to perform the ceremony for me. The interior of his office was a golden yellow in the late afternoon sun.

My sister had driven from Minneapolis, and was to take the pictures. After two shots, she motioned that she was out of film and didn't have any more. I thought, hey, that's okay...an innocent accident.

After the ceremony, the rings and the unity candle, were romantically over, I handed out champagne. I brought the DA a glass. He looked at me sternly and whispered, "I'm NOT going to do your divorce," then politely took the glass from me. I was puzzled by his remark, hurt, and, after the fact, have realized he must have known my husband or known something about him. I had gotten that feeling in the pit of my stomach for the first time, just then. I remember only silently turning away. I had no idea what to say.

Ha! then, the cake...later in the evening with friends. The couple who'd introduced us picked it up -- and his name was spelled wrong. We put a candy mint over his name and laughed.

That was our marriage - none of it actually laughable.

I read on. "*I have certain standards that I've set for you to meet... (1) you must trust me... (2) be honest to me... (3) have a commitment to me... (4) give happiness to me... (5) provide security for me.*" A bit later he wrote, "*One of the most difficult things I have to deal with is the hurt I allow myself to feel... I am working hard on overcoming*

this...if I don't...I'll fall back to my co-dependent behaviors. That's not good for me or anyone around me."

With God's help, I survived. Soon my daughter and I became more and more involved with things at school and after school - lessons, sports, musical events, YMCA, visits to friend's houses, scout meetings, plays, dance lessons, more horseback riding. We started eating in the car and I'd leave food warm for him. We'd leave him alone - try to stay away from him.

At night I'd cry myself to sleep. I was exhausted and always scared. I started sleeping on the couch, then tried sleeping on a small cot in the den. He'd get up in the morning and bang in the kitchen, very intent on waking me up. I finally began sleeping on the extra bed in my daughter's room.

Her room became our playground for dart games, projects, "Candyland" and "Chutes and Ladders," reading together and homework. I could close the door and lock out my fear. For whatever reason, he never came in there.

I never knew what might happen next. One summer, we took one of my daughter's friends with us up north to my parents' cottage. He surprised me with a new approach. He was generally angry, found projects to do, but didn't try to hide his feelings from me. One afternoon, while I was taking the girls waterskiing, I saw him riding on my daughter's pre-teen bicycle out on the road - a comical picture - him hunched over, his knees bumping against the handlebars. When I finally tied the boat to the dock, he jumped into it and drove away, without a word of explanation. In the

kitchen was a note that said he was leaving and we'd have to find our own way home. He'd ridden my daughter's bike back from the boat landing where he'd left his car and the boat trailer. He was gone.

I panicked. I calmed myself and told the girls to watch TV for a while. Then I cried. From that rural, isolated part of northern Minnesota, there is no bus, no transportation that travels to Wisconsin, and my parents were in Minneapolis.

Strangely he came back several hours later, not to make up, but to say that he hadn't been able to get the boat onto the trailer, and now it was too late to make the four-hour drive home. He planned to wait until morning.

In the morning we were all packed and waiting in the car.

So, what next...what did he have to say next?

Looking at the page, I think of his hand writing the letter. *"I don't have peace of mind when you're not with me...the pain when you are not with me is too great and too damaging to me."* I pause.

After a few more paragraphs, he writes, *"I share with you everything that I do. I have nothing that I hide from you. Inside myself I have peace of mind because I know that I'm not hiding anything from you. This is part of my recovery program."*

Shit, it sure is! my mind screams. And is that all? ...Probably.

He continues, *"I know in my mind I am not doing anything that would make you question my commitment of honesty and trust to you."*

Nights were very hard, were difficult times. I probably slept in the same

bed with him for our first two years – or part of them - then no more.

One night, very late, a man was walking down the road outside our house, singing off-key and a bit too loudly. It woke up my husband. He got up, naked, and took a gun from his dresser drawer. Stunned, I watched through the window as he confronted the man. The streetlight shown down on his skinny, naked body, his bare skin. He looked sickly white. He stood in that agitated crouch position that I'd come to know so well. I heard the man mumble, then some loud statements came from my husband.

He fired his gun.

Thankfully, not at the man – up into the air. Finally he came in and back to bed. He was almost calm and didn't have the gun. He angrily told me the man was retarded and that he was going to the next-door neighbor's to borrow cigarettes.

I couldn't get back to sleep. I never did sleep well after that. And I never could find the gun. He hid it in some other place after that night.

Some nights he acted fitful. I would think he was asleep, but I could never tell for sure. He'd toss and turn, sometimes in such a way that his arm or elbow would slam me in the face. I would lie there, waiting silently, listening until I was sure he was asleep, then I'd sneak out of the room. One night he pretended to be asleep and tried to push me out of the bed and on to the floor. That, actually, was my last night in the same bed with him.

“Joanna,” he writes, “my imagination runs rampant with inappropriate thoughts... I get jealous of other men, if they pay attention to you, or if you give other

men your attention. You may laugh at this and say I'm making something out of nothing – but it's the most important part of me for you to know, the most important part of my being able to make our relationship what you want it to be."

The yellow page seemed to stare back at me, the red pen lines examining me.

One day, he told me he'd break my legs...that I'd never walk out of the house.

He'd attacked me, was pushing me around and slamming me against the wall. He was always careful to never leave a mark. He happened to slam me up against the wall with the phone. I reached up and grabbed it. He snatched it from my hand and demanded to know what I was doing. I told him, "Calling 911."

He grabbed me more tightly around the base of my neck and growled out, "If you EVER try to call 911, I'll break your legs – you'll never walk out of here." He started shaking me.

I got out the only way I could. I collapsed to the floor, and he disappeared down the hallway and into the garage.

The fluttering yellow page says "7" at the top.

It's the "thank you" page. *"I want you to know that I sincerely appreciate the support you have given me...thanks."*

Two more pages left.

I continue. I feel overwhelmed, as if he's put me on some endless merry-go-round that is supposed to be "reason," but no form of reason or reality I can understand.

Hate him? Pity him? Ignore him? Not respond? Walk away?

The day I left, I finally had the courage to look through the shelves in the garage. I found several sealed garbage cans next to the tool bench - filled with liter bottles of brandy, all empty. My confirmation, as if I needed one. I was married to an abusive alcoholic. Perhaps that's why he was amazed that I would agree to a date and to his proposal of marriage.

Many years too late, I finally found the courage to "run."

I'd been offered several shelters from friends by then. Friends had noticed the changes in me, and three had told me I should come directly to "their house" if I ever needed help. One was the music teacher. I would politely thank them each time they repeated their offers, and I'd say, "I think things are getting better - I'll be okay."

I picked the music teacher's house.

It had been a very difficult week. On Monday, he'd punched me while I was driving with him in the car, talking about Christmas vacation - so hard that my arm had dropped to my side as if it was broken. Then he'd immediately demanded that I stop the car. I was afraid he was about to ask me to get out, to leave me on the side of the road in the snow, in the dark.

But he got out...and walked home.

On Wednesday, we visited with the neighbors, and later in the night, he began to beat me because he couldn't stay aroused. I had learned to appease him by maintaining fairly regular conjugal visits.

Thursday I thought... I tried to formulate a plan.

Then, on Friday, without any plan, I packed my clothes and some for my daughter into leaf liter bags, and threw them into the back of my car. I was scared totally. It was already dark. I hoped we would be gone before he arrived home. In moments we were in the car.

As I turned to start backing out the driveway, he drove in.

I felt anguish, some horribly heightened form of fear.

He got out of his car and put his foot on the bumper of my car, as if to block it.

Then he came around to my window – and asked what the hell I was doing.

I told him we were leaving.

He stood silently.

The car lights glinted in his eyes as he glared. I had the window down and put my hand to the button to try to close it. His hand rested heavily on the window.

He remained silent.

Abruptly he turned, said “fine” in a low voice – as if to say it was about time.

Then he moved out of our way.

We drove off into the dark night, my heart pounding louder than the car engine.

When we got to the music teacher’s house, I knocked on the door. She was surprised to see me standing there in the yard-light, yet not - and opened the door immediately and gave me a hug. It was late.

I brought my daughter and our bags from the car. She showed us to her

upstairs bedroom and brought us extra pillows. My daughter and I lived there for two weeks until I found a place for us to live - our mustard-yellow apartment.

Within days I also found a lawyer.

Despite my lawyer's advice, I chose to serve the divorce papers to him myself. I couldn't imagine the police walking into the building and his office. I think the crazy need was part of my own co-dependent behavior and my fear – something that I couldn't prevent, something that was part of the behaviors I had acquired to protect myself from his anger. I met him in the parking lot at his work as he was leaving for lunch. It took all the courage I could find to be considerate and kind to him – and he laughed.

He laughed.

But it turned out it wasn't at me. He laughed at his life, because he'd just been given papers at work saying they were going to fire him. Just before his lunchtime – for drinking and sexual harassment.

To my amazement, within two days, he had somehow managed to negotiate with his superiors, and they agreed to keep him on conditionally, if he went into rehab.

The yellow letter continues, continues with the wind. *“I need you to be intimate and share your feelings with me. I need you to be sensitive and considerate... I must do that for you also. I don't feel you realize how sensitive I am to every word you say or don't say – also how much importance I place on what you say. I would like to pick you up Tuesday “nite.” I wonder how much love and reassurance you'll share with me as we drive home. Please call me...I'll be up waiting. “*

The last paragraph reads, *"I just re-read this letter – "wow!" I'm really getting stronger and more secure. I expressed my feelings for you! It's honest, romantic, and it's written from my heart."*

At the bottom of the page, page "9," is an "I love you" – his last "I love you."

I fold the letter and put it back into the long white envelope, creasing the flap shut.

I walk into the house and write him a reply, "I'm sorry, there'll be no Tuesday. I hope all goes well for you."

I fold the paper in half and drive it to the rehab center, to make sure it gets to him as soon as possible. I ask that they give it to him.

I don't wait.