Tumbling Dice and Other Tales from a Life Untitled

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TUMBLING DICE
AND OTHER TALES FROM A LIFE UNTITLED

TAMMY MCKILLIP
Master’s Program in Creative Writing

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Dean of the Graduate School
This work is dedicated to my beautiful, eternally-young mother, who taught me how to roll.

*Always in a hurry, I never stop to worry.*

*Don't you see the time flashin’ by?*

*...You’ve got to roll me*

*And call me the tumbling dice*

—The Rolling Stones
TUMBLING DICE

AND OTHER TALES FROM A LIFE UNTITLED

BY

TAMMY MCKILLIP, MFA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of The Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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Creative Writing

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Writing a book feels like a guilty indulgence when you’re a middle-aged mom of two—the hours spent alone each day in an attic office, hunched over a computer keyboard, sweating bullets and agonizing over syntax and content when two flights down, the kids are left to fend for themselves until Daddy comes home from the office—the whole enterprise feels self-serving and more than a little narcissistic. When the manuscript you’re slaving over is memoir, the guilt quota increases tenfold. After all, says the annoying little voice in your head, who the hell do you think you are that people will want to read about you? Are you famous? Have you been in prison? Did you invent a vaccine? Climb Mount Everest? Nope. You’re just an overweight Jersey mom with graying hair and a bad back. There is absolutely nothing glamourous or enviable about your life. You’re behind with the bills, will never be able to repay your student loans, live in a messy house that’s about to be repossessed by the bank, and drive a six year-old car that carries a ridiculous interest rate on its note because your credit sucks. There are so many reasons not to write about yourself that you lie whenever anybody asks you what you’re working on. (You’ve learned the hard way to never answer the question, “What do you do?” with the words, “I am a writer,” or worse, “I am a student of writing.” Instead, you’re more apt to tell people you’re a “stay at home mom,” words which summon the image of practical domesticity, cleanliness, and nurture—in other words, words that need no further explanation and are, indirectly, at least, a lie.)

On the other hand, you have kept a journal since you were seven years old. Your favorite genre to read is memoir, creative non-fiction, lyrical essay and biography. Authors like Mary
Karr, Jeanette Walls, Elizabeth Gilbert, Rick Bragg, Anne Lamott, Joan Didion, Amy Hempel, Francis Mayes, Maya Angelou, Cheryl Strayed, Annie Dilliard, David Sendarís, David Foster Wallace, Eula Biss, Frank McCourt, Anne Frank, Tobias Wolff, Barbara Kingsolver, Joyce Carol Oates, Pat Conroy, Claudia Rankine, Elie Wiesel, and Meghan Daum, to name a handful, have inspired the storyteller in you and proven time and again that, aside from individual details, much of the content of human life is universal in nature. We are born; we grow up with families—some small, some large, biological or foster; we go to school; we have hobbies and friends, hopes and dreams; we experience illness at times and then moments of transcendent joy; we discover sexuality; we fall in love and cohabitate or not, marry or not; we have children or don’t, grow older, grow up (or not), experience heartache and loss, success and failure, glory and degradation. It’s all part of the human experience, even though we live inside our skin as though we are somehow separate from the world and unique. We really aren’t.

With that knowledge—that our humanity is a shared experience, that we are variations on a theme—you might wonder why anybody’s story is worth reading. If your life and my life are so similar in nature, if not in the details, that we can read about each other’s pain, joy, hate, love, loss and gain and nod and feel what it’s like to be inside each other’s skin for the length of a page or chapter or book, why bother with a narrative? Why write about one’s life experiences at all? The short answer is don’t. There are already plenty of memoirs on the market—good ones, interesting stories of how simple people overcame adversity or struggled with addiction, healed from sexual abuse, cheated on their spouse, lost loved ones, were sent to jail or rehab or just away for whatever reason. There isn’t a story out there that hasn’t already been told. Except, of course, yours.
We may have all been given the same raw materials in life, but it’s what we do with those ingredients that make for gourmet reading. It’s true that too many chefs in the kitchen spoil the food, but the right chef, inspired by experience and imagination, can create a sumptuous delight for the palette. Culinary metaphor aside, it’s the way you’ve lived your life that will resonate in the telling. Most of us aren’t Hollywood stars, famous athletes, or victims of notorious crimes. Most of us are just doing the best we can, day by day. We’re keeping afloat, struggling, working, raising our kids, trying to keep our marriages alive. These are the relatable concerns of good memoir. These are the universalities that provide an emotional connection between a reader and an author. Our interior processes as we move through our days, nights, years; our attempts at being more than we are and our failures—these are the experiences that we share. To write that and acknowledge the foibles of our humanity; to ponder the whys and the roads we did or didn’t take that led us to wherever it is we are—therein lies the grace of memoir. We—you and I—are imperfect creatures. We make mistakes. Memoir allows us to forgive ourselves and each other. If I have done it, perhaps you have, too. If you have done it to someone else, has it not also been done to you? Memoir reminds us that it is okay to be human—that no matter what we have been through, we’re still here, keeping ourselves in the game, and that, ultimately, is what is most important—that we participate.

Memoir may be historical, but it is not history. Unless you have been followed around by a scribe your entire life, your past is utterly subject to whatever perspective you inhabit now. This subjective nature makes the medium a living thing—as true in the present as any story of the past. Working from memory, reconstructing the life you have experienced in the past, one may only represent the thoughts in one’s head now—thoughts about what happened to whom and how that made you feel in some yesteryear or how whatever happened to you shaped you in
the now. But any story about your past is merely that—a story. It is the story you tell about
yourself, and it is ultimately no truer than fiction, no matter how well-documented your details
may be. If you asked the participants of a single scene in your memoir to write their own account
of what happened on a particular day, you can bet their version would be unique to their
perspective. Their truth will not be your truth. It is because of this subjectivity of experience that
the genre of memoir is so laden with accusation, guilt, and criticism. It is also what makes the
medium appealing.

If our lives are so very similar in nature, why do we yearn to hold up the mirror and relate
ourselves to someone else’s story? Because it makes us feel less alone. Knowing that, in spite of
the details, someone else has experienced the same struggles and felt the same feelings, gives us
a sort of peace inside; reminds us that we are okay. If so and so can get through that, then I can
get through this, we think. If she did that when she was young but grew up to be okay, then
maybe I can forgive myself for the things I did and move on. Even the darkest bits of our nature
can be held up to the light and finally seen for what they are—bits. We are a kaleidoscope of
being—a combination of shadows and light, flickering projected images on a screen. Seen
through the perspective of someone else’s tale, we may realize that our history is no more evil or
good than moments captured on film. Though we may replay our unique films again and again,
adding weight and import to their meaning, they are as ephemeral as thoughts—happenings
existing only in shadow play. The only power our past has over us is the power we give it.

We draw strength from the stories of others. We give shape to our own tales by relating
them to the tales of others. We compare and contrast. We judge and forgive. We can learn from
the misery and joy of others. Most of all, by reading memoir, we may celebrate humanity—our
own, and that of others.
All of these are good reasons to read creative non-fiction, but what is the benefit in writing one’s own story? Aside from reliving on the page our most painful and perplexing moments, there is the problem of how much of our lives to confess to strangers, whom to expose in our narrative, whether or not to approach our stories from the perspective of blame or forgiveness, and how to tell the “truth” without pointing fingers at friends and loved ones.

Mary Gordon writes, in *Circling My Mother*, “Perhaps the question the writer most fears from her potential readers is: Why have you done this? With the implication: Why have you done this to me?” (Gordon, 2007) If the writing of memoir is to be more than an exercise in self-analysis or a self-indulgent purge that shifts the burden of one’s past onto the reader, the form must reach beyond the place of bearing witness to tragedy, sex, coming of age, or disillusionment. It must offer some redeeming grace that extends forgiveness for the human experience, is inclusive and universal even in its most private disclosures. Again—the details will be unique, but the feelings about what happens in the world are shared by everyone, and the memoir that allows the reader to find the feeling within himself, rather than telling the reader what to feel, can deliver a catharsis, rather than simply dumping the weight of the author’s lifetime onto the page.

Narcissism has become a virtue in our culture of late—with our obsessive selfies, reality TV, moment-by-moment social media status updates, and personally tailored music and viewing habits. Baring our all would have been rare or even unthinkable just a few generations ago, but it is the norm in our society. When Henry James called autobiography “…the preeminent kind of American expression,” (James, 1884) he could not have imagined the extent to which his words would ring true in the 21st Century, with the daily laundry-airing on The Dr. Phil Show, season-long sagas of recovering addicts, or families who live with cameras recording their every move.
We are a society filled with people who want to know and be known. We want to bear witness to the fact that our idiosyncrasies and foibles are a shared experience, that other’s lives are as insane as our own. And yet the memoirists’ exhibitionism, no matter how honorable her intention, may counter the will of her friends and family when it comes to the public displaying of their human condition. What is fodder for the writer is always somewhat stolen goods, as no one’s personal experiences stand alone. They are always mingled with the actions and feelings of others.

Anne Lamott, in her book, *Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, writes, “Remember that you own what happened to you. If your childhood was less than ideal, you may have been raised thinking that if you told the truth about what really went on in your family, a long bony white finger would emerge from a cloud and point to you, while a chilling voice thundered, "We told you not to tell." But that was then. Just put down on paper everything you can remember now about your parents and siblings and relatives and neighbors, and we will deal with libel later on.” (Lamott, 1995)

While the memoirist in me takes comfort in the author’s sage advice, the daughter in me cringes; the mother in me balks; the wife worries; the friend feels guilty about sharing stories that may publically humiliate or embarrass my loved ones. Worse, I fear that, when writing from the point of view of my younger self, my perspective might offend or reveal something that will make those I care about wonder about my feelings for them then or now. And there’s the shame of appearing to judge the actions of others when in truth, any slight felt has most likely been long-since forgiven, as I hope that my faulty behaviors have been forgiven by them. There is just no getting around this issue. When writing a memoir, one risks hurting people one loves, outing people who’d rather not be outed, bringing judgement upon others. It’s inherent in the process if
one is going to be completely honest about the details of one’s life. For that, I apologize in
advance to the living, breathing characters of my lifetime. All is forgiven. Please forgive me, as
well.

Another inherently problematic issue in the genre is that of accuracy. People are not
machines, and most of us cannot remember verbatim conversations or even the exact sequence of
events from years ago with any degree of certitude. Mary Karr sums up the dilemma when she
writes, in *The Art of Memoir*, “Memoir is not an act of history but an act of memory, which is
innately corrupt.” This, she says, is because, “…from the second you choose one event over
another, you’re shaping the past’s meaning.” (Karr, 2015) In other words, the scenes you choose
to highlight from your past are not contiguous events in terms of your life—they’re brief edits
that tell the story you are trying to tell. You are already in the act of creating when you add one
scene to another, and while this doesn’t make your story any less “true,” or authentic, it does
share with your reader only one perspective—yours.

If my mother had a say in what I write about my childhood, my story would look very
different, I’m sure—not because I’m not telling it right, but because what I experienced as a
child was very different from what she experienced as a parent. The traumatic childhood moment
when she tossed out my favorite, tattered pink stuffed lion and I threatened to run away, told
through her perspective, would be a completely different story—one about a mom trying to
surprise her daughter with a clean room and organized closet. Both versions of the tale are
equally “true,” but since I am the one writing the story, it’s my version that makes it to the page.
(My mother would be happier if I provided footnotes throughout the text explaining things from
her end, but of course, this would make for an unreadable manuscript.)
Isaac Bashevis Singer writes, “…the true story of a person’s life can never be written. It is beyond the power of literature. The full tale of any life would be both utterly boring and utterly unbelievable.” (Flender, 1968) I suppose it would be possible to write a memoir that highlights all the joyous, boring, and pleasurable days as well as the tragic ones, but when I sit down to write, I find it is most often the pain that beckons examination. This is another troubling reality for my mother—on reading my manuscript, she feels compelled to call me every few chapters to apologize for the “terrible childhood” I had or for being “such a rotten mother.” Of course, I love my mother very much, and my childhood was not particularly tragic, or at least I never perceived it to be so (excluding adolescence, which doesn’t count) at the time. It was simply my childhood. I didn’t question it or expect it to be any different than what it was. It is only in looking back that I find my younger self in need of comfort or direction. As I write the scenes of my history, the middle-aged me wants to reach through the page and console or guide the me of my stories. I also feel a deep empathy for my young mother and am amazed at what she was able to accomplish and endure while raising a child, for the most part, on her own. She wasn’t the perfect parent, and neither am I. We do the best we can. As Maya Angelou writes, “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.” (Douglas, 2016) I am deeply grateful for my mother’s love, support and friendship. I feel very lucky to have the relationship with her that I have. I have never doubted her love for me—not once. I know how lucky I am at being able to say that, and if I write about the sadness, it is because, as Anne Sexton wrote, “Pain engraves a deeper memory.” (Sexton, 2011) Our history is shaped by that merciless carving knife, and because it is so deeply imprinted, our stories can be readily summoned and shared.
“It is only with distance that we are able to turn our powers of observation on ourselves, thus fashioning stories in which we are characters,” (Shapiro, 2014) writes Dani Shapiro. I would add that it is that distance that allows us to see those around us in the past with new eyes—to recognize us in them, and them in us. That empathy of the human experience is the healing balm that makes good memoir medicinal, like music. It soothes the soul. It is not a mindless diversion, but rather a Zen meditation, a connecting force that plugs the reader into the “we” of the “I.” To write effective memoir, then, one must find the universal within the subjective experience, to move away from indulgence and towards happening. Memoir is not reportage, but it does necessitate adherence to the “who, what, where, why, how,” rule. Any embellishment should serve the reader in finding her own truth within the text—to “tell” the reader what to feel denies her of the experience of active connection of which Carl Jung refers when he writes, “At times I feel as if I am…myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons. There is nothing …with which I am not linked. Here everything has its history, and mine; here is space for the spaceless kingdom of the world’s and the psyche's hinterland.” (Jung, 1963)

Writing memoir is much harder than reading memoir. There is no sense of the collective during the writing process—it is mostly a lonely and heart-wrenching enterprise. While I find myself worrying about how this person or that friend will perceive himself in what I have written, or wondering why so and so did what she did when she did it, it isn’t the cast of characters in my own life story that creates stress in my writing process—it’s the mirror I must hold up to myself and the reflection there that troubles me.

“Even the best of us are part-time bastards,” (Karr, 2015) writes Mary Karr, and it is only in looking back at myself through the years that I can see clearly what an ass I have so often
been. I would like to rewrite my behaviors, edit myself into a better-behaved, nicer, more together person than I ever was. It’s hard to write the truth about your past self objectively. I am quite certain that I must have at least assumed my own honest intention and an honorable character in my past, but as I write about my life, it is too easy to cast myself as the villain. More disturbing is the knowledge that I considered myself a good person in the past and would like to consider myself a good person in the present, but seeing my past self with an objective, distanced eye makes me wonder about my present self-image. How truly do we ever know ourselves in a moment?

“\nWhen we are green, still half-created, we believe that our dreams are rights, that the world is disposed to act in our best interests, and that falling and dying are for quitters,” (Wolff, 1989) writes Tobias Wolff, in This Boy’s Life. “We live on the innocent and monstrous assurance that we alone, of all the people ever born, have a special arrangement whereby we will be allowed to stay green forever.” Looking at and writing about my youth from the perspective of middle-age is an eye-opening and unsettling experience. I see a trajectory through hills and valleys that might have been a clearer path to…what? Wisdom? Success? Happiness? Something. Looking back, it appears I wasted a lot of energy running around in circles. I moved through and around people, places, careers, and experiences as if they were obstacles to some elusive, beckoning “It.”

Vladimir Nabokov writes, “Existence is a series of footnotes to a vast, obscure, unfinished masterpiece.” (Nabokov, 1966) It is in writing memoir that I can more clearly see the woods through the trees—an ever-expanding forest of experience that cannot be digested or completed by any one human. I see now that it was always the moments that counted—not the whole, but the pieces, one by one. Each moment is everything. It is all we ever have.
“Knowing that everything comes to an end is a gift of experience, a consolation gift for knowing that we ourselves are coming to an end. Before we get it we live in a continuous present, and imagine the future as more of that present. Happiness is endless happiness, innocent of its own sure passing. Pain is endless pain,” (Wolff, 1989) writes Tobias Wolff. Many of the people I have written about in this manuscript have passed on—their moments have ended. They exist now only in the minds of those whose lives they touched in the moments they were here—and in the pages of this book. I hope I have done service to their memories by including them in my stories. I hope most of all not to dishonor them with my words. If I have somehow misrepresented anyone or their actions in my stories, I hope at least that a greater truth is served in the error—that of being human and fallible. In Wolff’s words, “… this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story.” (Wolff, 1989)

As a writer of memoir, my influences are many. I have, no doubt, borrowed from some of my favorite authors in the genre and included techniques I have learned from reading their works. Mary Karr taught me to say it like it is, without framing the events in judgments. Jeanette Walls inspired me to seek the humanity in even the most unsympathetic of characters. Tobias Wolff’s plain-speak and Geoffrey Wolff’s poeticism provided stylistic boundaries within which to aim my own language. Nabokov was a guiding star—too heavenly and out-of-reach to aim for, but a light source by which to navigate through my own linguistic desert. Amy Hempel taught me that one’s life stories do not have to be presented sequentially or even through the same genre within a single manuscript. (I have only, at the last minute, pulled my fiction and poetry from this book in order to make it more accessible as a whole to my readers. Perhaps someday, though, I will throw the whole bunch into a sack and shake them up, then publish them
in whatever order they present—we’ll see.) “The Bloggess,” Jenny Lawson, provided me with hours of the best laughter I’ve had in years and made me realize tragedy can be really, really funny if you have a good enough appreciation of the absurd. Cheryl Strayed showed me it’s okay to show your worst side, as long as you don’t wallow in your own stink too long. She also taught me, in her book, Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar “Whatever happens to you belongs to you. Make it yours. Feed it to yourself even if it feels impossible to swallow. Let it nurture you, because it will.” (Strayed, 2012) No truer words…

In conclusion, to answer the questions I posed to myself at the beginning of this preface: What is memoir? Why would anyone want to read mine? I will quote Jeanette Walls, who writes “Memoir is about handing over your life to someone and saying, ‘This is what I went through, this is who I am, and maybe you can learn something from it.’” (Kita, 2009) I hope you will enjoy sharing these pieces of my past and that they will serve you in the reading as well as they served me in the writing.
Introduction

Most of the stories in this manuscript were written while I was an online MFA of Creative Writing student at University of Texas at El Paso. I am deeply indebted to my mentor and instructor, Liz Scheid-Blau, for her patience, endless kindness, and wonderful advice throughout my writing process. Her memoir, *The Shape of Blue* (Scheid, 2013), inspired me to choose this form for my thesis, and I am grateful that she was willing to take on the challenge of helping me to shape my own colors with this work. Thanks also to Lex Williford for his empathy and sage advice when I was workshopping some of these stories in his class. I am grateful to all of my instructors in the UTEP program for guiding my writing processes and teaching me to have a more critical eye when looking at my own work.

Parts of three of the stories in this manuscript were previously published prior to my tenancy in the UTEP program. An earlier version of “Captain Hook and the Chicken,” appeared in *The Columbia Review* in 1999. A version of “Diana and the Do-Gooder” was published in the City College of New York journal, *Promethean*, in 2011, and the same journal published “Amazing Grace and the Lemonade Stand,” in 2013. Pieces of a few of these tales have also appeared on my online blog, MomPress (MomPress.WordPress.com.) My essay, “Truth Be Told,” was second place prize-winner in the *Tom Howard/John H. Reid Fiction & Essay Contest* and will appear in the spring 2016 issue of the online journal, *Literal Latte*.

While I have tried my best to write the truth as I remember it, and I have gone back to change stories when family or friend readers found fault in details, memoir stories are created, even when being re-created. I do not claim to have a photographic memory, and any dialogue
presented in my stories should be understood to be an approximation of what I recall having been said. Many of my life stories and through-lines are missing here—it simply is not possible to follow every thread of every relationship in my life within the confines of a single manuscript. Because of that, I have had to minimize or erase a few people who may have been present during the happenings recounted in my stories. I have also, in the story, “Captain Hook and the Chicken,” combined the events of two separate occasions into one tale—not to confuse the narrative, but rather to convey the Truth of what happened without the unnecessary distraction of other characters and their timelines. Everything I have written is “true,” in that the events happened to me. However, the part about the pony happened on another visit. During the visit I write about here, my father and step-mother had to leave me with my grandparents to celebrate their belated Honeymoon, as their first Honeymoon had been interrupted by a hurricane. The back story of why I was staying with my grandparents on this particular occasion would have complicated the narrative and distracted from the “true” events I wanted to write about, so I combined bits of two visits into one to place me alone at the house with my grandfather. Nothing is invented in the story—only rearranged for clarity.

I have neglected to expand upon my relationship with my husband and the events leading up to our marriage. Perhaps those stories belong in a future text. For now, I will keep them private. Likewise, I have kept my children mostly off the page, with the exception of a short essay on my daughter’s mental health issues. I chose to write about one very rotten summer because the subject resonates with the stories about my father and because I believe that writing about pediatric psychiatric disorders may help to shed some light on a topic that remains, for the most part, hiding in shadows. I am eternally grateful to my family for their support and love during all the good times and bad. Your stories are written on the pages of my heart.
My “friend from California” appears as a cameo throughout many of the most turbulent times in my young adulthood, with no other narrative to define her. For this, I apologize to her. She has remained a dear friend since our first meeting in 1982 and deserved to have many stories written about her in this text. I just could not find the proper context in which to introduce her and our long friendship within these pages. I hope to remedy that in a future version of this manuscript, and I thank her for being my sole non-academic reader—a role she performed as well as any film or television part she has played. Thank you, Sylva! Thanks, also, to MoMo—for all the insane fun we had sharing a haunted apartment in the East Village. I plan to write about that time someday soon.

Finally, the stories presented here are just that—stories. They are the ones I tell myself about who I am and where I have been. They are my truth. I love every character that has played a role in this crazy production I call my life. I have created you in these pages with all the compassion I hope you would grant to me in writing your own life events. If I have gotten anything wrong, please forgive me. If I have offended, please know that that has not been my intention. If you write your own stories and include me as a character, think of Deborah Kerr’s words in *Tea and Sympathy*, and, “please, be kind.”
I am late to the funeral. My connecting flight has been canceled. At the customer service counter, I behave badly. I threaten to call the media, scream at the smiling representative when she hands me a toothbrush and washcloth and suggests I find a nice bench to sleep on until my flight from Atlanta back to South Carolina is ready to board in the morning.

“No, no. You don’t understand,” I whine. “I don’t live in South Carolina. I just CAME from South Carolina, by way of Virginia. I’m supposed to take a connecting flight for Houston.”

She tells me she’s sorry. She understands my predicament, but the connecting flight has been delayed, and the next one isn’t until tomorrow morning. If I’d like to wait, she can book me on that flight. Otherwise, I’m welcome to go back to South Carolina. My return flight to South Carolina will still be honored tomorrow.

My head is going to explode.

“Why would I want to RETURN to South Carolina tomorrow when I haven’t yet ARRIVED at the destination I left South Carolina FOR yet?”

I speak slowly, in caps and italics, as if she has trouble understanding me. I emphasize the important words.

“I am trying to get to HOUSTON for a funeral in the morning. AFTER the funeral, I will return to South Carolina and fly back to Virginia.”
I have left my family in a camper in the mountains of Virginia to make the unexpected trip during our much needed and completely unaffordable vacation.

“I flew HERE from THERE to go to HOUSTON. I don’t want to go back THERE until I have been to HOUSTON.”

She sighs and smiles as she reminds me through a locked jaw that there is no longer a connecting flight to Houston—not until tomorrow afternoon. She tells me she will be happy to put me on that afternoon flight to Houston, but for now, she can only offer me the flight back to South Carolina in the morning.

I look behind me in a helpless and unfruitful appeal to the 30 or so other passengers who have been bumped from their flights. They are annoyed that I am taking so long with the customer rep. They don’t care that Karen is dead. All else having failed, I throw a tantrum.

“BY TOMORROW AFTERNOON, MY BEST FRIEND’S FUNERAL WILL BE OVER, LADY! MY BEST FRIEND IS DEAD. DEAD, DO YOU HEAR ME? UNEXPECTEDLY, SUDDENLY DEAD! AND THE ONLY FUCKING REASON I ABANDONED MY FAMILY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CAMPING TRIP AND RENTED A CAR AND TOOK TWO PLANES IS SO THAT I COULD BE AT HER FUNERAL IN HOUSTON AT 10 AM TOMORROW MORNING, AND GODDAMMIT, I AM NOT GOING TO MISS IT JUST BECAUSE FU AIRLINES CANCELED MY CONNECTING FLIGHT, YOU STUPID, SMILING BITCH!!!”

Before anyone can call security, my dam bursts. Until this moment, I have been fueled by adrenaline and sheer force of will, but the smiling Barbie doll from FU Airlines has broken something in me. I collapse to the floor like an unplugged inner tube.
People step over me to get to the ticket counter as I sob into the carpet. I’m making a scene, but I don’t care. Now that I’ve let it go, I want to weep here until I fall asleep. All around me, indifferent, hurried pairs of feet sidestep my noisy puddle and my limbs. Their hems brush my face as they pass. I give up. I will not make it to Karen’s funeral. I’ve let her down so many times over the past 30 years. Now this. If only I could have just done this one thing. If not to be there through thick and thin, to at least be there in the end.

“Um, hi. It’s none of my business, but if you want, there are ticket counters for about 40 other airlines right around the corner,” says a frazzled-looking young angel-man in a business suit. He reaches down and helps me stand up. Oh, I think. Yeah. I can buy another ticket and just hash out the refund thing with FU Airlines when I got back.

Duh.

Once in Houston, there is an issue with the rental car, and then I get hopelessly lost on the spaghetti loop of freeways that are unfamiliar to me after so many years away. I arrive at the church during the last half of the eulogy—the part just before loved ones are invited to walk the red carpet and see the star up close and personal. Inside the gleaming white casket, she waits for me, smothered in yellow roses.

_Nicky Arnstein, Nicky Arnstein... I’ll never see him again._

I have never seen a dead body up close before. I want more than anything to shut my eyelids tight, hold my breath and ease on past the main attraction, slip out the back door, get back into the rental car, and high-tail it back to the safety of the strange mountains where my
family waits. Instead, I walk to the satin-lined casket and look at this doughy figure with an odd, molded smile they say is her. She has been away for so long already, I think. Nothing about her pasty, swollen face is familiar. Only the yellow roses.

I remember thinking the last time I saw her that she had really let herself go. She couldn’t have been more than a size 10 at the time, but I was the same size we had always been, before, back when we would crawl out onto the roof to retrieve the smoldering cigarette butts we’d tossed from her bedroom window, less afraid of falling than of getting caught by the adult whose footsteps we heard in the hallway. Back then, I could pull into either pair of rumpled jeans at the foot of her water bed and only realize later they were hers, when the fringed hems of the bell bottoms tickled the tops of my flip-flopped feet.

We could have gone through all of life’s stages together, I think. She was a year older and a grade higher until she dropped out and I, one year later, followed suit. A year isn’t so much. Our lives might have gone right on paralleling. But she made different choices –LA to my NYC, Hollywood to Broadway—even though Barbra Streisand’s mother had told us both to stay put and finish school. I smile at the memory.

“It’s just a phase, dears. You’ll outgrow it.”

Ear to ear embracing her powder blue princess phone, our fingers entwined in the long spiral of tangled cord, we roll our eyes and grin at each other in the mirror because we know that’s exactly what she had said to Barbra. We know because we’ve read it. We’ve read
everything about our idol. And though we have pooled our allowances to pay for the weekly calls we make to Diana Kind, who is lonely enough or kind enough to indulge her daughter’s “two biggest fans” in conversations about Barbra’s favorite color (yellow) and favorite pastry (cinnamon rolls), we know better than to listen to her when it comes to stardom—after all, it was her discouragement that sent her oldest daughter across the river, away from the “baseball, boredom, and bad breath” of Brooklyn and into The Lion’s Den of Manhattan. She told Barbra she wasn’t pretty enough to be an actress, and suggested she enroll in a typing class. If Barbra didn’t listen to her mother’s discouraging words, why should we?

We’re going to be famous.

“She hadn’t been right for a long time. I don’t know when the last time you talked to her was, but she’d been off for a while.”

Karen’s older sister, Connie, is sitting next to me at the table at a cheap Italian strip mall restaurant her family has rented for the after-funeral lunch. Janice, the oldest of the three sisters, is bragging about her kids to an aunt she hasn’t seen in years. In a corner, Karen’s husband, Big Tim, stands holding a paper plate, looking bewildered.

“I’m glad you could make it,” he says to me when I approach him. “She would have been happy to know you were here.”

I am heavy with guilt and a 30 year-old lie.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I say. “She was my best friend.”
Maybe LA vs. NYC wasn’t the choice that split our lives. We might have gone right on embracing the same universe, hugging the same destiny from opposite sides of the country. It was really more about Darvon and unruly periods, ovarian cysts that brought her to her knees once a month and kept her out of school for days on end. The path she chose was supposed to end the pain. The path I chose was supposed to bring fame and fortune.

It’s 1977. We’re skipping class in Target—hiding out in the new strip mall only a few hundred feet past the chain link fence we hop after home room, lured by the wall of fan magazines and the smell of popcorn. Only she’s curled in a fist on the bathroom floor, screaming, crying for me to call her parents. She throws up. She needs a pill.

“The doctor says I have to either have a hysterectomy or a baby to make it go away,” she moans, in explanation. I’m afraid for her until she tells me it’s always like this—every month. I stop worrying about her and start worrying about how much trouble I’ll be in when my mom finds out I skipped school.

Two years later, she chooses.

I’m still in Texas then—doing theatre and living with Temporary Boyfriend in a rental house that we will litter and leave behind a few months later, attaching a U-Haul to my Toyota Celica, wrecking the engine as we pull my life uphill through the mountains of North Carolina on our way to NYC.
It’s three hours earlier in LA, where Karen has lived for six months. TB and I are in bed when she calls to give me the news about her and the cinematographer.

“We got married on a cliff overlooking the Pacific at the end of a road in Malibu, off the Ventura Freeway. It was so romantic! I was barefoot, and I had Baby’s Breath in my hair, just like Barbra in *A Star is Born*.”

I grip the phone like it’s her wrist, thinking, *She did what?!*

But there’s more.

“I’m pregnant—three months. And he’s happy. Not at first, but now he is. His dad has a Christian film company in Iowa, and we’re going to move there for a while until we can save up some money. He can work for his dad, and his mom will help with the baby.”

Iowa? A *baby*?

I try to imagine my best friend living in Iowa with a baby, but it’s all too much, and I have no idea what Iowa even looks like. Brown, I think. And flat.

“Wow. I’m so happy for you, Karen,” I say, but my stomach wraps itself into a small, tight knot.

I have news, too, I tell her. TB and I are moving to New York as soon as the show closes. I’m starring in a local production of *Gypsy*, and my picture has been in the newspaper. Between that and the past three years singing in clubs, I’ve decided I’m ready for my big break. Ha. We squeal at each other and wish each other luck, which we don’t need because we’re obviously already so lucky. We promise to write, call.
In New York, my addresses, like my boyfriends and my jobs, change with the seasons, year after year. A six-month sublet on the 18th floor of a building on East 9th Street is first. One day, shortly before the end of my lease, a psychiatrist from the 21st floor falls past my window and lands on E. 10th Street. I’m napping at the time, but for weeks, I can’t look out the window without seeing him fall. Every pigeon or scrap of litter floating in the breeze becomes a body. I say goodbye to TB along with my deposit, the city view, furniture that is not ours, drawers we cannot open, closets stuffed with other people’s clothing, and a carved walnut baby grand piano that I have played and my peek-a-poo puppy Bogie has peed on every day because neither one of us have gotten this whole walking on a leash thing three times a day down yet.

Bogie, the wardrobe boxes and I spend a few weeks in my co-worker’s cramped studio, but that doesn’t work out too well. She has kittens my dog chases all night, and, a student at Julliard, she practices the piano at dawn. With help from my mother, I get my own lease on a third floor Upper East Side Brownstone walk-up.

I’m a waitress in midtown and taking acting classes downtown, at The Actor’s Playhouse. That’s where I meet The Snail. We’re together for two years. I’m not Jewish, so the first year of our relationship is all about him keeping me a secret from his parents, who live in New Jersey and expect him home for dinner twice a week. When his father and I both attend opening night of the Off-off-Broadway showcase he’s performing in, The Snail pretends not to know me after the show. I throw away the flowers I have bought him and walk home in tears.
“I can’t marry you, you know,” he’d said that first time, a second before entering me. The timing of the words and the backwardness of his even feeling the need to say something so stupid made me laugh so hard we had to stop.

“Don’t worry,” I’d assured him after I stopped laughing, “I don’t plan to get married until I’m at least 30. I want to be a star first.”

Perhaps if he had added the words “because you’re not Jewish,” I might have taken him more seriously. Perhaps if I had not said, “I want to be a star first,” he might have taken me more seriously. He’s eight years older than me, but so is everybody I know.

It takes an hour and a half and three trains to travel from my hot pink studio on East 82nd Street and East End Ave, to his subsidized two bedroom apartment in the West Village. I do this several times a week with my peek-a-poo puppy, Bogie, smuggled inside a clutch under my arm. He pokes his head out of the zipper when I get a seat on the train, panting, pink-tongued and locking his black button eyes with my own. I kiss him on the head to let him know we’re okay.

I land a part in a dreadful Off-Off Broadway musical called *Club Potpourri*. My understudy’s name is Kate. She is 19 and new to the city from Connecticut. She is my first real friend here, and we laugh a lot. Until he tells his parents about his “shiksa goddess,” The Snail can’t invite me to move into his apartment, even if I am spending most nights here. I find a studio in Chelsea, two doors down from the odd, port-holed Maritime building and in the building next door to Kate. We can’t afford to buy essential living supplies solo, so we share a mop, broom, dust pan and grocery pushcart. No one on this street speaks English or has a
telephone. When they want to speak to each other, they stick their heads out the windows and holler at each other. Kate and I take to using the window whenever we have something we want to say to each other. To fit in, we scream in broken Spanish.

“Katarina! Necesito the mop!”

“Si, si…. Esta aqui.”

We think this is hilarious.

The show closes, and Kate won’t wait on tables. She invites a friend from boarding school to share her apartment and eventually returns to Connecticut after the lanky Asian roommate goes to work for an escort agency and moves into her own place, Uptown.

Karen sends postcards at Christmas—Sears shots of the perfect American family. She sits beside her husband and holds the new baby boy. Her daughter wears patent leather shoes and a bow in her hair. We made different choices, I tell myself.

“How could you do it?” I ask her, my face burning.

“It felt good,” she shrugs, flicking the tip of her cigarette into the gutter. “You should try it.”

We are sitting on the hot curb outside the drugstore, our banana bikes lying on top of one another on the sidewalk. Karen blows a bubble, then pops it all over her face and laughs.
“You want me to tell you all the details?” she asks, and I blush again and say, “No!” But I do…sort of.

“Anyways,” she adds, shrugging, “I’m not really sure if it went all the way in. His girlfriend came home before we could finish.”

“Holy shit!”

The cute guy from her dad’s office—a real grown up, with his own apartment and everything. I’m mortified by what she’s telling me because for the past two years, she’s been in love with Billy from the ice rink, and he recently broke up with her because she refused to do it with him. I try to act cool.

“What did you do then?”

“Rode my bike back home. –Hey, is it true you can get pregnant with just a drop?”

I have no idea. A drop of what? I act like it doesn’t matter to me one way or the other, like I’m tired of talking about it. But the truth is, I have been left behind, abandoned. And I hate her for it.

We made different choices.

When my turn comes to choose, I don’t. I just do what I’m told.

“I’ll pay for half,” says The Snail.
“If you want me to fly up there and hold your hand while you go through it, I will,” says my mother, from the house she shares with her new husband in La Jolla.

“We’ll have to biopsy your uterine tissue,” says the maternal, Indian gynecologist I am referred to when the Pap smear I get, along with my pregnancy test, at Planned Parenthood comes back abnormal. “If you wait, it could be too late. But don’t worry. You are very young and healthy. You will have plenty of opportunities.”

The Snail skips an audition and accompanies me to and from the clinic, then tucks me in on his sofa, hands me the remote and goes out to buy ice cream.

This is the moment I choose, and it is too late. It’s done.

When he returns with ice cream, a stranger who looks like me greets him with puffy eyes and a woozy, disconnected smile. The relationship is effectively over by the time he fesses up to his folks and invites me to share his apartment (and half the rent bill), which I do, for a while.
One day, I’m watching cable TV when I see an amazing sight on the new all music videos all the time channel—still considered a running joke for a few more years, as are the all weather and all news channels. As if people would actually sit around watching television all day and all night. (Who knew?) My friend Andrea is singing lead in a new group called The Flirts and there she is—on TV—singing a silly song called “Don’t Put Another Dime in the Jukebox.” I call her up, excited, and she tells me her label is looking for someone new—a girl singer to be part of a duo. She suggests I audition for her producer and promises to put in a good word. I have no interest in singing disco music, but I figure money is money, and singing is singing, so I make an appointment to meet the producer and go to Betsey Johnson’s to buy a cute outfit. After auditioning alongside (I swear) a portable record player for the manager, I am taken to into the producer’s office. Bobby Orlando is an Italian boy wonder who has revolutionized the dance recording industry by churning out cheaply-produced EPs (extended plays) sung by a stable of mix-n-match singers under contract to his Bobcat label. I don’t know any of this about him yet—only that he’s young—in his 20s—cute, and apparently very busy.

He is on the phone when I walk into his office, but he looks at me briefly, gives a thumbs up to the manager, who takes me back into his office and hands me a five year contract to sign. He tells me to expect a phone call soon from the other half of my duo, then sends me on my way with a wad of cash for “performance clothing—rock and roll, you know.”

I meet Vicky a few days later. She is as befuddled as I am about this whole recording thing. She was an English major at Rutger’s when her roommate suggested doing a little bit of
modeling. What the hell? Vicky thought and called up her friend’s modeling agent in the city. No sooner had she walked through the doors than the agent asked her if she could sing, to which she replied, “Sure, I guess.” Like me, she was sent to the record label office and made to sing along with the record in the manager’s office before being presented to Bobby, who gave the thumbs up and handed her a contract. She, too, was given shopping money and the instruction to cut her hair—make it look more “modern,” which she has just done, and here she is, looking snazzier than she has ever looked in her life and excited about the unlikely prospect of suddenly becoming a disco diva.

We are two parts of a team, and now we’re supposed to get to know each other. Oh, and hire a choreographer because we’ll start touring in a week or two. We’re in tears laughing by the time we’re done rehashing our contract experiences, and it’s clear whatever strange disco gods have a hand in our meeting, they must know what they are doing, even if we don’t. Over the next six months, Vicky and I will take part in an odyssey like nothing either of us has ever experienced—and we’ve experienced plenty of odysseys between the two of us.

One of four children, Vicky’s story is a veritable soap opera compared to my own. Since before she was born, Vicky’s mother has been in and out of mental institutions—diagnosed with dementia at an early age and treated with electroshock therapy. Still, her father—a tenured physics professor at Rutgers—continued having children with her. Vicky’s oldest brother never leaves the house and will still be unmarried and living at home well into his 40s, when his father dies. Her older sister is a heroin addict and prostitute living in Atlantic City. Vicky recounts harrowing tales of her sister’s early signs of teen defiance and how her bullying father chaining her to the radiator when she refused to obey him. Her younger brother will leave school to join the army and will be dishonorably discharged from a year later due to a drinking problem. Vicky
tells me how embarrassed she’d been as a child when her mother would show up at PTA meetings in her bath robe, with blood from her period seeping through the back. Or how her mother would take all four of the kids to the beach and sit in the sand wearing a sundress with nothing on underneath, her legs splayed indecently.

“Mostly, I remember all the screaming,” she tells me. “We were that family—the one all the neighbors talked about.”

The so-called “normal” one in the bunch, Vicky is her father’s favorite—his only hope. Early on, when she showed an aptitude for ice skating, he enrolled her in lessons. At the suggestion of her skating coach, Vicky was sent to an expensive Colorado boarding school for ice skaters. She was being groomed for Olympic medals when she fell during Nationals and cracked her skull open on the ice. She spent weeks in a coma before being sent back home to think again about what she wanted to be when she grew up. She was biding her time at Rutgers, trying to figure it all out when her friend’s modeling suggestion landed her the recording contract. And here we are—she and I—on our way to disco stardom. The randomness of it all keeps us in stitches, and the laughter through tears we share now cements what will become a bumpy, but life-long friendship.

We hire a choreographer and work on our dance skills in front of a wall of mirrors at Fancy Dancer—a dance studio I intern at in exchange for free classes during the week. We are handed cassette tapes and told to emulate the voice as much as possible. Never mind that the record was obviously recorded by a solo voice and not a duo—sound just like her. We are sent to a professional photographer and photographed in our new disco clothes—micro miniskirts with
wide white belts and 4-inch pumps. A few weeks later, our manager, Joseph Ladato, herds us into a limo to meet a plane, where another limo takes us on a long drive through the countryside outside of Boston. We stop at several radio stations where we are interviewed by DJs about “our” hit dance single, “These Memories.” We get the giggles when the DJs ask us how we formed our duo—how long we’d been singing together. For every question we cannot answer, we turn helplessly to Joe, who speaks with a thick Italian accent and has a bad comb-over that blows in the breeze when we lower the automatic windows in the limo—which we must do frequently because he sweats buckets through his polyester shirt and wool jacket and smells like yesterday’s pizza.

We laugh at everything. Everything is funny—insanely funny. We look at each other with expressions that say, “What the HELL is happening to us?” Joe chastises us about our interviews when we are in the limo—tells us to come up with better answers, be better at pretending that we knew each other before, formed our duo on our own.

At a small gay disco in Boston, we lip-synch into mikes and do our dance. The crowd cheers, and after our performance, people come backstage to give us cocaine and accolades. Joe tells us we did okay, and we raise our eyebrows, thinking, “at what?” Our next show is at The Metro—a warehouse-sized discotheque with brass railings, a massive concert stage with a full sound and light booth up above, and dance floors that light up from underneath. A white stretch limo picks us up from our motel and we share the back seat with Vicky Sue Robinson and two ladies from The Ritchie Family. Being a strictly Broadway gal, I have no idea who we are riding with. Vicky is beside herself. She keeps stage-whispering in my ear, “TURN THE BEAT AROUND!” And I nod at her, smiling. No idea.
The Weather Girls are also part of the show this evening—an anniversary celebration for the radio station, it turns out. We take miniscule origami envelopes of free cocaine in the bathroom before the show and snort a line or two before being ushered into the line-up just below the stage and behind the lights. To Vicky’s horror, I leave the line-up moments before it’s time to go onstage to run back to the bathroom and do another line because I crave the magical head rush and can’t handle the soon-to-follow let-down.

When the DJ announces the “special surprise” – Bobcat Records’ newest hit sensation, *Oh, Romeo*—us—we run up the steps to take our places in the blackout as the audience cheers. Only we’re standing there forever. There’s a problem with the sound system, and we can hear Joe in the sound booth, yelling at the sound guy in his peeved Italiano-American. Our arms—held out to the side for our starting posture—grow weary. The audience begins to murmur. We can’t just stand like this. Somebody has to say something.

“Anybody here from Boston?” Vicky asks the room full of Bostonians. There is a confused pause, then the room cheers and claps, getting the joke. I ask if anybody is from New York, and there are a few weak claps from the back of the room just before, mercifully, Joe screams, “Go!”

The music starts up, but we are not in our starting positions, and we try to scramble back and get into the dance at the right point, but it’s hopeless. We are flummoxed and high, completely running on adrenaline. So we give up on the choreography and just bounce around mouthing the words to the song we didn’t record. Vicky staggers on her heel, then screams, “Fuck it!” and kicks both shoes off and pulls two boys to the stage to dance with her. The crowd loves this, but now I am stranded on one side of the stage, doing a solo bop and sway, which
looks and feels ridiculous, especially since I am only mouthing the words to the record. Can’t they tell it’s obviously the record and not us, I think? Can’t they tell it’s only one singer and not two? Apparently not. Or maybe they don’t care.

For our second number, we have prepared an actual song—meaning, one that has already been recorded by another singer on the label, but with the vocals removed on the track so that we can sing it. This will be the true test, I think. The song is in a completely different register from the hit single we’ve just lip-synched. And Vicky’s voice and my voice are very different. I’m a trained singer (trained for Broadway, that is), and Vicky is a sing-along-with-the-radio sort of singer, which gives her the advantage in this forum, though I don’t realize it at the time, stuck up theatre snot that I am. The problem isn’t our voices or the song (which we don’t even know the actual words to, as they are unintelligible on the original tape we’ve been practicing with for weeks). The problem is that we are blitzed—unfocused, completely thrown by the cocaine and the fiasco of our first number, the missing shoes, etc. We look at each other in a blank panic as the song starts—hoping the other one will remember how the lyric starts or who is supposed to sing first. This, of course, makes us start laughing. Because everything about this insane experience of being plummeted to instant disco stardom makes us giddy with laughter. We don’t know enough yet to fake it or cry. We are young and stupid. There’s nothing at stake. So now the music is playing, there are thousands of people watching us, clapping along, and we are bopping to the beat and looking at each other and laughing with microphones in our hands—not singing.

Since I’m the “professional,” I decide it’s up to me to pull this act up by its boot straps. I place my mouth directly onto the microphone head and sing vowel sounds with random consonants thrown in. I make faces like what I’m singing has meaning, raise my eyebrows, point
at the crowd, point at Vicky, who thinks this is even more hilarious and doubles over laughing. I
dance over to her and turn my back to the crowd.

“Sing something!” I scream in her ear.

She attempts sobriety and starts mouthing vowel sounds into her mike, which makes her
snort powdery snot through her nose. Now she is beyond saving, as is the act. We are not booed
off the stage, but the patrons have confused expressions on their faces as they continue clapping
along with the tune. When the song is over, and the lights go out, we practically push each other
down the steps and into the bathroom, where we collapse on the floor, shrieking.

Moments later, Joe sticks his head in the door to make sure nobody else is in the room,
then he steps inside and washes the sweat off his ghostly white face.

“No good,” he says, quietly.

Seeing his expression, we realize what we’ve put him and the record label through just
now, and we sober up momentarily.

“This was no good,” he repeats.

The degree to which his pronouncement is an understatement throws us into another
round of hysterics. Joe watches us laugh, shakes his head. We beat the concrete with our fists.
Our mascara runs down our cheeks. We can’t catch our breath. He remains still until our hilarity
is played out, then he says to please come with him. We need to talk.

We look at each other as we follow Joe past The Weather Girls singing It’s Raining Men,
and now that the drugs are wearing off and our laughter has subsided, we are ashamed. We walk
quietly, docilely behind Joe, who leads us through a set of doors into a building across the
parking lot. So caught up are we in self-pity and remorse, we haven’t noticed where our manager
had led us until the double doors open, and we find ourselves inside a very noisy bowling alley.

“Wait here,” he says, depositing us at a small table by the snack bar. We avoid looking at
each other because we’re both thinking it—feeling it. It would be stupid to laugh now, no matter
what unlikely spot Joe has brought us to for our chewing out. He returns with plastic cups of
soda—one for each of us—one grateful suck down in one gulp. We are sweaty,
dehydrated, disheveled. I’m thinking about all the money we’ve borrowed from the label to pay
for choreographers, clothing, plane tickets, and I fear we’ll be fired and left in Boston, in debt up
to our little coke-filled noses.

“This can never happen again,” he says. “If we give you girls another chance, this can
never happen again.”

We promise him it won’t—blame the faulty sound system and the predicament we’d been
in—how thrown we’d been by the delay. Vicky tries to explain that being nervous makes her
laugh—she’ll work on it. I tell Joe how deeply sorry I am and promise we’ll be ready—tight—
next time.

The label takes no chances on our next tour date. Instead of Joe, this time Denny
O’Connel is our escort. A wise-cracking, overweight homosexual who has worked for Bobby for
years, Denny is an old hat at tour managing and knows how to corral his singers into their proper
corners. We show up at the airport wearing dark sunglasses—dressing the part of divas. On the
plane, we chain smoke Benson and Hedges all the way to Fort Lauderdale…We discover
Denny’s funny as hell, and by the time the white limo picks us up at the airport, we are all fast
friends. There are roses on each seat for Vicky and me—along with welcoming us to *The Backstreet*.

Denny arranges for our sound check before we check in at our hotel on the beach. We’re back to lip synching. The fact that the DJ is aware of this fact is humiliating to me until he tells me not to worry—everybody lip synchs this cavernous room, even the big stars. We run through our carefully rehearsed dance numbers and follow Denny back to the hotel, where we have adjoining rooms so he can keep a close eye on us. After the show, we’re supposed to go straight to bed because we have a radio interview first thing in the morning. If all goes well, maybe we’ll be able to catch some rays on the beach for a while before our flight back to New York the next night he says.

Our hit single—the one neither of us has recorded—is now everybody’s favorite disco song, or so it seems. The crowd cheers so loud during the song (which we aren’t singing) that I don’t worry that they will notice it isn’t us or that it’s really only one voice on the recording, not two. They *love* us. Especially when Vicky kicks off her shoes and drags a few dancers up on stage—her thing now, I guess. I still don’t have a thing, but it doesn’t matter because all eyes are on her. I’m happy to pop silently along behind her because I am shy, and I feel like an idiot lip synching disco songs. After our hit, we lip synch to the other song we’d so badly butchered in Boston, and the whole place goes nuts. We’ve learned one more for our portion of the show—meaning, of course, that we’ve memorized the lyrics and dance steps so that we can move our lips and bodies in time to the music—and when we’re done, they throw flowers and beg for autographs.
Backstage, we’re all sweaty and triumphant when there is a knock on the door and a bronzed blond Adonis brushes past me, his eyes locked on Vicky. She’s amazing, he says. He loved it when she pulled the people up on the stage and danced with them. I bite my tongue instead of saying that’s because she’s an out-of-control amateur who can’t keep her shoes on during a performance. Obviously, this is what disco fans like. I’m just the singer not singing bopping around in the background. Whatever.

The guy comes along with us in the limo because he’s infatuated with Vicky, and Denny is infatuated with the guy. Back in the hotel room, he asks if we’d like to do a little blow, and we look at Denny, hopefully.

“Absofuckinglutely!” says Denny. With that, the blond Adonis pulls a baggie out of his jacket with a giant chalky rock of cocaine and breaks it open on the end table beside our bed. There is coke everywhere—all over the table and in the thick shag carpet. Vicky and I drop to our knees and start sniffing the floor. The man laughs and cuts dainty little lines across the table, then invites us to imbibe.

Later, I have no idea where Vicky and the Adonis have gone, and I find myself in Denny’s bed having something that feels like a teenage slumber party. We’re sharing all of our deepest, darkest secrets, and our lives seem fascinating beyond measure. The sun comes up, and Denny throws on a swimsuit and heads for the beach. On his way out the door, he reminds me about the interview, which is supposed to take place in a few hours. Holy shit—the interview!

I go back into the room I’m sharing with Vicky and find her in bed, on the phone with her father. She’s telling him all about me—how much he would like me and what a great friend I’ve become. She hands me the phone and tells me to say hi to him, which I do. I remind her
we’ve got to get some sleep because we’re supposed to have this interview thing on the radio in a few hours, and she says goodbye to her dad and then proceeds to tell me all about her conversation with him. The sun is shining full on now, and I look nervously at the clock. We’ve only got a couple of hours to sleep, I say, and she says I’m right. We’d better stop talking. Only we can’t, somehow. We’re both tucked into our beds, trying to sleep, but every few minutes one of us calls out to the other one, and we’re yacking again. About the fourth time this happens, we start to giggle every time one of us says the other one’s name. Then we swear not another word.

I get up to go to the bathroom, and Vicky calls out, “Tam?” which sets us off again. I realize I can’t pee or poop, even though I feel like I really, really have to. I’m seeing what appear to be little sprinting garden gnomes out of the corners of my eyes. They’re there for one split second, and when I turn to face them, they’re gone. I blink.

“How many lines did we do, Vick?”

She can’t remember—stopped counting at about 30, but that was hours before Adonis went away. (After Vicky told him she was a virgin.)

My heart is racing. I’m afraid.

“Vick?”

“Tam?”

“I can’t pee, and I’m seeing little men.”

We’re both laughing again. I give up on trying to go.
The phone rings—our wake-up call from the front desk. We decide to ignore it. Denny is on the beach, so maybe we should go swimming or something. We put our bathing suits on and float in the surf, which feels like bathwater. When we can’t find Denny on the beach, we stumble back into our hotel room and crash. We never make the interview, but since Denny abandoned us to go in search of Adonis and his plentiful cocaine, we are not in trouble for our antics, this time.

We fly back to New York later wearing our dark sunglasses and holding our crumpled roses. Back at the office, Denny gives us a bill for the cocaine. Turns out it wasn’t free—only covered by the label until we could cough up enough money to reimburse Denny. We will have to do more touring to break even.

Karen calls late one night to tell me how talented her daughter is—that she’s already singing on pitch and seems to have caught the performing bug. I listen to a rendition of Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star and agree that Shannon has a lovely voice. I tell her about the disco thing, but I’m sheepish about bragging, since my voice has not yet appeared on any of the records I’m performing to. I decide to have a talk with Bobby—to make it clear that this is not what I signed up for and insist that I sing for real.

A few weeks later, I am in the recording studio, singing. Vicky doesn’t show up, so I record the new song “Take a Chance (on Me)” solo. There are backup singers and percussionists working live with me. The rest of the tracks have already been laid down. Bobby hands me a lyric scribbled on the back of an envelope. After we record the first verse, I realize the second verse lyric is one he has used previously on another recording. We come up with a new one on the spot, and we wrap the whole record in less than an hour.
When the EPs arrive in cardboard boxes several weeks later, Denny calls me into his office to have a look. There has been a labeling error, he says. Instead of saying, “Oh, Romeo,” the name of our duo, the label says the song is by “Waterfront Home,” a group that does not exist. But he assures me that this isn’t a problem—I’ll just be the new lead singer of a group called “Waterfront Home” now. Vicky, whose voice isn’t on the record anyway, will get a new partner for “Oh, Romeo.” He says the DJs have already received their review copies of the record, and the word is it’s going to be a huge hit. Everybody loves the song. He tells me not to let Bobby know that he told me so, though. He prefers to keep his singers off-balance so they don’t get too cocky and ask for more money.

I’m done. I can’t. I don’t want to be the lead singer of a new group. I don’t even want to be in a duo anymore. I love Vicky, but this disco life is killing my soul. I’ve received exactly $110 for recording this song—that’s it—all I’ll ever get, though the record goes internationally platinum and streaks up the Billboard charts for the next 18 weeks, topping out at number 11. I can’t know this at the time, though. I only realize what will happen if I stay. I’ll never be anything more than one in a stable of interchangeable singers. I’m on to Bobby now—how things work at Bobcat. And I want no part of it. I want out.

I tell Joe to let me out of my contract, and he tells me to be sure because once I’m out, I’m out. Someone else will be hired to lip synch as the lead singer of “Waterfront Home.” And Bobby is planning to make a music video of this one—don’t I want to be on MTV?

I ask him what will happen to Vicky if I leave, and he assures me the label has big plans for her—not to worry. I speak to Vicky about it, and she wants me to stay—doesn’t want to keep singing disco music if I’m not there with her. But she knows it was really never my thing—that
my dream is to be on Broadway. She decides to quit, too and go back to school. It’s been crazy, fun. Now it’s over. We will remain friends and continue to laugh about our 15 minutes of fame and Joe’s comb over for the next 30 years.

Back in the West Village, I’m once again unemployed. Vicky makes frequent trips into the city to hang out with me. The Snail has landed a job managing a small theatre space at the 92nd Street Y and comes home later and later. Vicky and I go out dancing, in search of free cocaine. We frequent The Peppermint Lounge, Magique, The Limelight. We dance with strangers and charm our way into VIP lounges where coke is passed around on silver trays. One night, I leave the balcony of a club that is closing, and I search everywhere for her in the shock of the harsh fluorescent lighting. She’s gone. The last time I had seen her, she had been schmoozing with a guy wearing a gold chain around his neck. I’m holding her purse and sweater.

I return to the apartment and wait by the phone. When I still haven’t heard from her the next day, I call the police then track down her roommate at Rutgers to get her dad’s phone number. The roommate is annoyed—says it’s “just like her” to pull something like this. Her brother says her father isn’t home right now but she’ll probably turn up eventually—she always does. But she doesn’t even have her purse, I say. Nobody seems concerned about her disappearance. The Snail says she probably found some guy and is holing up with him. I tell him Vicky’s a virgin, and he thinks that’s funny. No—really, I say. She is.

Another day goes by, and the phone rings at 6am.

“Tam?” she whispers.
She just woke up and has no idea where she is—maybe somewhere in Queens. She’s been asleep the whole time. The guy she’d been with at the club is still out. They’d done blow and talked for hours and hours about bullshit. Now she wants to get the hell out of there before he wakes up, but she doesn’t have her purse or any money.

I tell her the police are looking for her—her roommate at Rutgers, her brother, dad. This makes her furious—how could I have called her roommate? Her dad?! The police? I try to explain how worried I was—that she just disappeared without her purse or sweater. I had no idea what had happened. She could have been lying in an alleyway dead. She hangs up on me.

I tell The Snail he’d been right, and he says I should lose her—she’s a bad influence, anyway. I should be auditioning, working—not hanging in bars and doing coke. I know he’s right. The disco thing is over. It’s time to focus. And fuck Vicky.

I mail her purse and sweater back to Rutgers, and I don’t hear from her for six months.
On my 21st birthday, *The Snail* has to work late at the theatre. I’ve been fending off the advances of my boss at the punk rock clothing store I work at on 8th Street. But when he offers to drive me home—by way of a quick trip on the Staten Island Ferry to see Lady Liberty up close and personal on my special day, how can I refuse? He’s twice my age and a notorious rogue, but I don’t care. I’m a consenting adult as of right—now. He kisses me at midnight then drops me at my front door.

The next day, I tell *The Snail* I’m leaving.

I finagle my way into a one-bedroom apartment on West 45th Street by pretending to be the girlfriend of the super of another building the management company manages’ nephew. I sign a lease in my own name, but he is listed as my roommate. This is, supposedly, a favor the old super and his nephew are doing for me out of the kindness of their hearts. When the nephew calls me up after I move in and wants to know if he can actually stay with me, I tell him, “No!” and hang up. I never hear from him again, but I live in fear that he will assert his right and figure out a way into my lease.

I get a job working as a singing waitress at *Something Different*—a dessert nightclub on East 78th and First Avenue, across the street from *Catch a Rising Star*, where established and up-and-coming comedians like David Brenner, Sandra Bernhard, and Robin Williams work out their jokes in front of a live audience.
My cohorts over the next year include Saundra Santiago, who will leave the land of sticky desserts to star in an Arthur Miller revival on Broadway and then become the leading lady in TV’s *Miami Vice*; Mer Mehta, son of the famous conductor, Zuben Mehta; Liz Larson, who is later nominated for a Tony Award for her role in the Broadway revival of *The Most Happy Fellow* stars in numerous Broadway shows, and on *Law and Order*; Kathy Robinson, who performs for years as a singer and actress, then lands the role of “Mrs. Periwinkle” in a children’s television show by the same name.

Working at *Something Different* is all about keeping a low profile in front of the battling owners, Pat and Frank. I wash ice cream and chocolate syrup off my apron all night, duel with the noisy cappuccino machine, and hold my own against fiercely competitive co-workers. Sandra Santiago literally backs me into the kitchen wall one night after I sing “Don’t Rain on my Parade”—a song I’ve been performing since my Houston piano bar days with Lee.

“Hey, that’s my song!” she spits through a clenched smile. Her pupils are dilated. I tell her I didn’t know and won’t sing it anymore, but I do—just not on her nights. Liz and I battle over who can belt the highest note. She wins, with an impossible F. Mer has a lovely voice but prefers singing humorous “ditties,” like a number about being eaten by a great white shark, set to the tune of the Beatle’s “Yesterday.”

*Yesterday, I went swimming in the bay*  
*Saw a black fin and began to pray*  
*Now how I long for yesterday*  
*Suddenly, I’m not half the man I used to be...*

On our breaks, we eat and play arcade games at the Pizzeria on the corner. Sometimes Robin Williams is here, alone, playing *PacMan*. He is humble and kind, and we are in awe of his accessible, down-to-earth persona. We never ask for his autograph. We act cool, like fellow
performers sharing a common break in the evening. His audience will wander into our club after watching his set, and we will sing for them (and bring them cheesecake or a sundae).

During the week, we are the entertainment, but the weekends at *Something Different* are a nightmare. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, we host *Broadway Kids*—ice cream birthday parties where the performers are pint-sized, like their audiences. The room is packed to capacity with squealing, screaming tables of child actor/singers and their mothers. During the weekend shows, we only sing once—at the end of the kiddie show, while the sticky ice cream dishes are being cleared and the nervous parents are tallying their checks. But we might as well not sing at all. The kids are so hyped up on sugar they wouldn’t listen to us even if they could hear the cranked sound system over the sound of their own screams. But none of that matters because it’s the kiddies they’ve come to hear, and they are, without fail, fabulous. Many of them, like Debbie Gibson and Scott Grimes, have Broadway or recording credits under their belts, and a few will have grown-up futures in show biz. Scott goes on to star in the weekly series *ER*, and Debbie continues writing and recording as an adult.

One night, a customer calls me to his table after I sing. He is a well-groomed older man with silver hair, a tan, and a thick diamond ring on his pinky finger. He shares his table with a pretty, fashionably attired woman who appears to be in her twenties. He tells me his name and hands me a business card, says he and his date are very impressed with my voice and would like to speak to me about a recording contract. He tells me he was instrumental in making Laura Brannigan a recording star and would like to do the same for me. I blush and nod and place the card in my tip apron, promising to call him soon.
A few weeks later, I am onstage singing when I see him sitting at a single table in the back of the club. He is smiling and waves at me when I catch his eye. I blush again because I have forgotten to give him a call like I promised, and I’m not even sure what happened to his business card. He invites me to sit at his table after I sing, and I tell him I’m not really allowed to hang out too long when I’m working, but he assures me the owner won’t mind, as she knows who he is and that he is a talent scout. I tell him I have tables that need attending to, and he writes a number on the back of another business card and asks me to call him at his hotel in the morning because he wants to introduce me to someone who can help me with my career. I promise to call him the next day, and shortly after our conversation, he leaves.

When I call Money Man at his hotel the next morning, he sounds rushed and businesslike—not unfriendly, exactly, but busy. He tells me he is in town on business—that he works in the diamond trade and owns several jewelry stores in Alabama. He is also an investor and has funded the start-up careers of several recording artists, including Laura Brannigan. He wants me to meet him for dinner tonight at his hotel. He says he has told someone very important in the music industry all about my voice and would like to introduce me to him before he leaves town. He’s sorry he doesn’t have more time to talk, but we can discuss the details later, at dinner. He gives me the address of his hotel, and I scribble it down on the back of his business card and tell him I’ll see him later.

When I arrive at the hotel, the concierge rings Money Man in his room then tells me a room number and points to the elevator. I check my reflection in the brass doors, fluff my hair,
and smooth my skirt. I’m nervous, but excited at the thought of meeting with someone who can help my career.

Money Man opens the door and invites me inside his room while he makes a couple of last minute phone calls. He is dressed in a business suit and tie, and his jacket is hanging on the back of a chair in front of a small desk with several lines of cocaine and a rolled up dollar bill on it. He slips his jacket on, the telephone cradled between his shoulder and his cheek. He motions for me to help myself to a line, and I do while he speaks tersely to whoever is on the other end of the telephone line about meetings and diamond deliveries. When he hangs up, he apologizes and snorts a line of coke, then hands me the dollar so I can snort the last line. He tells me how happy he is that I agreed to meet with him and rings the concierge for a car.

A few minutes later, we are riding down Park Avenue in the back of a stretch limousine. Money Man mixes himself a drink from the in-car bar and offers one to me. I tell him I don’t drink, and he giggles and says something about how wholesome I am and that it’s refreshing to meet someone like me here in the big city. I giggle, wondering how he can consider me wholesome after sharing lines of coke with me moments before. He tells me we’re picking up his buddy, Sid Bernstein and have I heard of him. I tell him I have not, and he tells me that Sid was responsible for bringing The Beatles to the United States and more recently produced Laura Brannigan’s first album. Most importantly, he says, Sid is going to make me a star.

I have butterflies in my stomach when the limo pulls up to a Park Avenue high rise, and the doorman opens the door for Mr. Bernstein. He is a rotund, jovial figure wearing a yellow and black striped shirt and black pants. He looks like a bumble bee, and I make myself less nervous by imagining him with antennae on his head. Sid is effusive and quite friendly. He chatters on
throughout the ride and opts for an inexpensive pizza joint instead of a fancy restaurant for dinner. I am shy and can’t think of anything to say, but it’s okay because he and Money Man never stop talking and appear to hardly notice I’m here.

Sid is telling us about his friend, Shirley McClain, who has just written a book about reincarnation and her spiritual journey. He thinks she is a bit nuts, but he loves her anyway and hopes the book does well. I make a mental note to read the book, “Out on a Limb,” before we meet again. Sid has a great idea he wants to run by Money Man. There’s this old theatre in Harlem, The Apollo. It had been a vaudeville house and then a popular talent venue, but it’s been shuttered for years and is in danger of being demolished. Sid thinks if someone would just invest in a restoration project, he could put something together—a show or something—and maybe televise it once a week. He thinks it would be great for the whole neighborhood and maybe even bring Harlem back to its glory days.

Money Man says it’s a crazy idea, and why would Sid want to waste his money on a Harlem project when there are better bets out there to invest in? Me, for instance. Money Man says Sid needs to hear me sing—that I should be his next big project, that he should produce me. Sid nods and tries to be polite, but I can tell what he’s thinking. Sid thinks Money Man is just trying to impress me—that he wants me to sleep with him. I am embarrassed and wish I hadn’t come to this dinner. We all pile into the limo after eating pizza, and Sid gives me a friendly peck on the cheek when we drop him off a few minutes later. I wave goodbye as we pull away from the curb, and Money Man says not to worry—that once Sid hears me sing, he’ll be begging to produce me. He tells me that everything Sid touches turns to gold, and if he does decide to produce me, he’ll make me a bigger star than Laura Brannigan, whose song, “Gloria,” is the only record of which I am aware of recorded by her.
The next step, says Money Man, is getting a good demo tape put together—something that will really impress Sid. Since he lives in Tuscaloosa, he thinks he can more bang for his buck in an Alabama studio, with Alabama players. He tells me to give him a call the next day to discuss travel plans. He’ll pay for my ticket and cover any expenses I may have along the way, will even reimburse me for missed work and will tell my boss why I’ll be out for a few days.

A few weeks later, I call Vicky from a room in Money Man’s Alabama home. I have a chair pushed against the doorknob and am whispering about my predicament. Vicky is concerned, but of course, the whole situation is ridiculously funny, as well. We begin to laugh until there are tears on my pillow. Here’s the gist: Money Man paid for my ticket and picked me up at the airport. On the way to his lovely suburban home, he told me his wife recently left and took his three boys with her when she found out he had been having an affair with a college co-ed named—and I shit you not—“Sandra Dee.” He is excited to introduce me to Sandra Dee, who is about my age and has been told all about my arrival. First, though, he drives me to a local radio station to meet a DJ friend of his. He tells the DJ that he is meeting the next Laura Brannigan—only better—and that one day, he’ll be spinning my records on the air. Back at Money Man’s house, he plays Johnny Mathis records and takes “publicity” photos of me in between snorting lines of cocaine. He tells me how similar my vibrato is to Johnny Mathis’ and that it is a rare quality in a singer. The doorbell rings, and I meet Sandra Dee—a truly lovely, intelligent woman who slips my her phone number when Money Man is out of the room, “Just in case,” I need to call her at any point while I’m here. I pocket the number, thank God, and it is she who rescues me the next night after Vicky suggests I call the police, when Money Man is in the next room masturbating and crying, begging me to come out of my room and join him in bed.
Prior to this disgusting scene, things had been going strangely—but well. I had been introduced to the University of Alabama band during one of their rehearsals, and Money Man had told them he was producing a record for me and that they would be playing on the demo. They were given copies of sheet music to play, and over the next several hours, we recorded a number that was written in the 1950s.

Later, back at Money Man’s house, a group of local musicians came by on invitation to meet with me and discuss making another demo. Sandra Dee asked me a number of times if I was okay, and Money Man drank himself into a sloppy stupor until everyone left. When I told him goodnight and headed to my room, he called me into his bedroom, where he was lying naked across his bed, touching himself. I told him this made me very uncomfortable, and he began to cry about how lonely he had been since his family left. He just needed a little company, and wouldn’t I please just sit next to him for a while. He wouldn’t touch me, he promised. I told him no, this made me too uncomfortable, and he should just go to sleep—everything would be okay in the morning. Then I locked myself in the guest bedroom and called Vicky, then Sandra Dee, who said not to move. She’d be right over.

A few minutes later, I could hear loud arguing at the bottom of the staircase. Sandra Dee screamed for me to, “run,” and I threw my things into my suitcase and didn’t even close it as I ran down the stairs. Suddenly, there’s a gun between the two of them. I’m not sure whose gun it is, but they are struggling for it. Sandra Dee screams at me hurry and get into her car, which she has left running outside, and I do, fully expecting to be shot or witness to a murder. Money Man is accusing Sandra Dee of stealing something—perhaps me, I’m not sure—and she is screaming at him about how many times she’s told him to get help, that he’s sick and an addict and out of
control. Then I see her running for the car, Money Man in stumbling behind hot pursuit, his bathrobe open. We squeal out of the driveway and onto the Tuscaloosa freeway.

I spend the night in a sorority house with a group of very friendly southern girls who are amused and horrified at my situation. Sandra Dee enlists the protection of her musician friends, and I spend the next two nights with her at an apartment across town. She calls the songwriter and producer I was supposed to work with and tells them about my predicament, and they decide to record me for free and give me the demo. So on the day I leave Tuscaloosa, I am driven to the airport by Sandra Dee and my new friends—a songwriter and a sound engineer. We promise to keep in touch, and I tell them I’ll do my best to shop the recording we made when I get back to New York.

I receive a few phone calls and letters from Sandra Dee over the years, but we eventually lose touch. The demo is one of many I keep in a plastic shoebox in my attic. I never see or hear from Money Man again.
A year later, I am still not on Broadway, but I have a disco record on the charts and a new apartment in Hell’s Kitchen. Karen calls one night when Vicky is here, chain-smoking and watching a movie on TV. I listen with half an ear, making “talky-talky” moves with my hand and rolling my eyes at Vicky while Karen lists her complaints: Iowa sucks. Her husband is always out of town. His parents are Jesus freaks who hate her. Nothing she does is right. The kids are driving her crazy. She wants to leave, but they won’t let her—have threatened to take the kids away and declare her an unfit parent if she does. She is messing around with a teenage boy who lives down the block. She gave him a blow job on her sofa. She still has awful periods, but the doctors have given her pills to help numb the pain, lessen her anxiety, ease her troubles. She’s planning to have a hysterectomy.

She slurs her r’s, I notice, but I don’t say anything.

Enough about her. What about me, she wants to know. How is New York? Show biz? Anybody special in my life yet? Did I see Barbra on that awards show? She says I shouldn’t wait too long. Kids are a pain, but they’re worth it.

I’m 21. She’s 22. And there is nothing she can say, nothing I can say, that connects.

I get my Actor’s Equity card and spend the next year working in theatre. The next time Karen calls, I am on the Upper West Side, with my new boyfriend, On Again, Off Again. I’ve left his phone number on the outgoing message of my answering machine in Hell’s Kitchen,
where I moved after leaving The Snail. Here, I have my own drawer in the bedside table and a key that I am welcome to use as long as On Again, Off Again knows I’m coming first. My framed glossy resume photo is on the dresser, though I picture him tossing it into the drawer as soon as I leave and standing it back up only when I’m making my way uptown after notifying him of my impending arrival.

He kisses and licks my toes while Karen talks. Candles burn on every surface. Edible body oils, body paints, a feather, and a battery-operated dildo are lined up at the foot of the bed. The television is on, but the sound is muted. Boats drift by on the Hudson River eleven stories below outside the window. Blue flickering shadows from the television screen animate the ceiling and walls. Later, after he calls out my name and comes, he will stumble into the kitchen and back, unmute the TV and curl up beside me underneath the comforter, sipping a milkshake and feeding me homemade chocolate chip cookies, fresh out of the oven. All night long, we will watch rented movies, make love, and sleep cuddled in each other’s arms. I am hypnotized by this man and his excesses in all things, obsessed with the absolute indulgence that leaves me always craving more, like a dangerous drug I can’t afford. I will battle this addiction for another 12 years.

I try to concentrate on what Karen is saying while On Again, Off Again touches me. She has found Jesus and prays for me every night. Oh... She and her husband sleep in separate rooms Ouch!, but he has agreed to move back to Texas with her and the kids—away from his parents, closer to hers. Mmmm...

“Do you know the Lord?” she wants to know. Gasp. “I mean, have you asked Him into your heart?”
I tell her yes, of course, as On Again, Off Again flips me over and pours hot oil on my bottom. I push two buttons at once on the phone and act like another call is coming in.

“Karen, let me call you back tomorrow,” I say, but I never do.

It’s Christmastime, and I’m visiting my mother, who has moved back to Texas with husband number three. I’m here for a week when Karen calls. On Again, Off Again is temporarily out of the picture, and, at 21, I’m legal and headed back into trouble with my first teenage love—Never Really Was—a divorced, bisexual, bipolar pianist with three kids. By the time he comes around for real, I will have outgrown him, but I won’t figure it out until I live through the fiasco of getting engaged.

Karen wants to introduce me Little Timmy, who is six and just like his father, “Big Tim,” and Shannon, an eight year-old beauty, who ice skates. I answer the doorbell, and the kids tumble inside first, giggling. This is when I think, Wow, she’s really let herself go, though she hasn’t really — not yet. She’s still holding on.

She’s dressed in frayed jeans and is bra-less beneath her t-shirt. Her hair is three different colors, ranging from bleached blond to mousy brown. It falls in soft, straggly waves around her shoulders. She wears no makeup at all and has a cigarette in one hand, just like always.

“Hello, stranger!” she says, and I throw my arms around her, embarrassed and sad for us both.
An hour later, we’re eating salads across from each other on my mom’s glass dining table. Our Diet Cokes have condensation rings that make them slide back and forth in front of our plates whenever we put them down. Our forks clink on the china plates. Karen nods her head in the direction of the kids and whispers, “The neighbor caught them giving each other oral sex in the backyard.”

“What?”

I’m choking on a salad leaf and am not sure I heard her right.

“Oh, it’s nothing, no big deal. They didn’t even know what they were doing…Just something they learned from the little boy down the street. But Big Tim gave them a spanking and told them not to do it anymore. Yeah, the things you go through as a parent. You wouldn’t believe it.”

The kids have crawled underneath the black baby grand in the entrance way and are having a noisy battle. I look at the children— my own innocence shattered — and am suddenly so, so grateful that I am not her.

Before she leaves, Karen asks my mom if she would like to sponsor Shannon’s skating lessons. She has made the skating team, and will be in training before and after school every day, but the lessons are expensive, and Karen is signing up sponsors to help pay for them. My mother politely declines and later balks at the audacity of asking a friends’ mother to pay for her daughter’s skating lessons. My mother has never liked Karen, who she always considered “unwholesome” and a bad influence.
Karen hugs me goodbye in front of her yellow Trans Am. The kids wave from their car seats as she pulls out of my mom’s driveway, resting her arm on the rolled down window, flicking cigarette ashes into the road. She toots her horn twice at the end of the road.

“I mean, really. Who does she think she is? If she can’t pay for her own daughter’s lessons, then she shouldn’t sign her up for lessons!” my mother says, and I am equally embarrassed at Karen’s desperate audacity and my wealthy mother’s stinginess. I wish I could afford to pay for the lessons, but I no longer a disco diva—I am an actress, which means I’m living on tips at the moment.

Who *does* she think she is? I wonder.
The cross-country relationship with Never Really Was plays out predictably and ends, along with a brief engagement, $78 dollar round-trip flights and People’s Airways. It is followed by a season of summer stock and Anyone Who Will. Then I’m on tour, which means On Again, Off Again suddenly wants me back. Too bad, I think. He’ll just have to wait. I send him sexy art postcards from the road, while I flirt with Buff, the Lady Wrestler’s Husband just for fun. We swim the beaches of Ogunquit, walk through the witch labyrinth in Salem hand in hand, and close the show in unromantic Akron. While in Ohio, I work with Robby Benson and Russ Thacker in a production of *Do Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?*

Back in the city, I find myself back on the Upper West Side, my framed photo staring at me as On Again, Off Again tickles my bottom with a feather. He has turned the phone ringer off, but he forgot to mute the speakers on the machine, and suddenly she’s here, in the room with us.

*Um... Hello? Um... Hi. I hope this is the right number. This is Karen, and I just was hoping to speak to Tammy. I think this is the number she left on our message. Anyways......if this is NOT the right number, then sorry. Ha ha. Tammy, if you get this message, it’s me...Karen. I just was thinking of you and wondering how everything’s going there. Everything’s good here. Shannon won her first semi-final. Now she goes on to the final. Timmy got an A in science. He’s such a brain. Don’t know where he got THAT...not from me. Anyways...If you get this message, please call me, okay? I miss you. Hope everything there is going well. Okay, then...Bye.*
“Jeez, I thought she’d never shut up,” says On Again, Off Again. Then he enters me from behind, and I shut my eyes.

She didn’t leave her number, and I have lost my address book. I could call information, but I don’t remember the name of the little town outside of Houston they’re living in now. This is my excuse for not calling her back, but the real reason is that I don’t want her to pray for me anymore, and I am sick of hearing about her kids and her bad marriage.

I am so much older than the face in the photo, I think. I need something new.

I get a job working as Cupid Bunny at Playboy’s new Empire Club, on Lexington Avenue. On Again, Off Again swaps out my framed headshot with the new promo picture of me in my pink costume, holding a bow and arrow, my mouth a surprised “Oh!” I have become a toy.

I move back to the East Village—first, to an unaffordable floor-through back on East 9th Street, then a small one-bedroom on St. Mark’s Place I share my new best friend, Maureen Davis. She’s doing eight shows a week on Broadway in Into the Woods, but the rest of the time, she and I hang out at Broadway Baby—an uptown cabaret/piano bar where On Again, Off Again plays Monday nights. Her boyfriend George plays guitar, and during her vacation weeks, Maureen arranges for On Again, Off Again, George, she and I to sing for a week at Club Med, in St. Lucia. We call our group Lush Life. The location is a romantic Paradise, and the housing, food and drinks are free, but On Again, Off Again, having (I later find out) fallen in love with yet another distraction, is on his way back out of my life, and I spend much of the week miserable and neglected in the bed beside him.
When On Again, Off Again and I break up for the third time and George refuses to commit to her, Maureen decides to move to LA. Into the Woods has closed, and though she has performed in a couple of cabaret acts and a children’s theatre production, she’s unwilling to take the menial jobs she’d need to keep afloat in New York City. Stranded with an apartment I can’t afford, I move to a cheaper one bedroom two doors down. I quit the Playboy Club in a huff when a customer calls me “Stupid Cupid.” I remove my ears and tail and shove them in the manager’s face. I leave so abruptly I forget to clean out my locker and am embarrassed to go back and retrieve my shoes and my pink ears, which I will later regret not having saved.

I work as a singing waitress at Broadway Baby and a singing “hostess” in several Japanese piano bars. We’re like geishas, with none of the glamour. We light cigarettes, pour shots of Chivas, titter at jokes told in a language we don’t understand, sing and yes—sometimes even slow dance with drunk, but always polite Japanese businessmen. The pay is $80 a night. I ride my bike to the club at 9pm, put on my sexy clothing, work until 1am then throw sweats on over my dress and bike back downtown.

I get a temp job working days as a receptionist in a midtown law firm and fend off the advances of Tone Deaf until he invites me to Hawaii and promises our relationship will remain platonic if I will just please accompany him. Tone Deaf, a young corporate attorney, is fond of singing along with James Taylor when he gives me rides home in his Audi after work. I love James Taylor, but Tone Deaf refuses to sing in the proper key. I cannot bear the sound of his singing voice, and it angers me that he cannot hear the pitch or recognize that he is nowhere near it. Also, he has a dreadful last name, and I would rather not risk falling in love and marrying him and being stuck with a lifetime of being called something as ridiculous as Mrs.Bumblefunfer. But it’s a free trip to Hawaii, so I go.
The trip is an emotional disaster. I find myself in Paradise with the wrong man, and standing on the balcony of our hotel room looking at the sun setting over Kannapolis Beach, I am lonelier than I have ever been. By the second night, he’s begging for sex—crying that he loves me and can’t bear to share a room with me without making love. Feeling guilty for not feeling the way he wants me to feel and wanting the things he wants me to want, I begrudgingly perform oral sex on Tone Deaf, and he falls asleep happy. I lie awake hating him and myself, and I become cold and distant during the rest of the vacation. When we return to the mainland, I quit my job and stop answering my phone until he finally gives up and stops calling.

Vicky and I get jobs working together at a karaoke bar called Sing Sing. The owner is an adorable little Cambodian man who writes poetry to me on bev-naps and begs me to sing Alfie every night. I have a crush on the comedian MC that works at the club until I find out he’s a hopeless alcoholic that has abandoned his wife and daughter somewhere in Jersey. Unfortunately, I only find that out after getting involved with him. I try to shake him by leaving the job, but he follows me—shows up backstage when I’m performing in a musical cabaret revue and tells everyone he’s my boyfriend. I try to be clear about my feelings, but he is impenetrable. I am relieved to be cast in a three month long production of Jesus Christ Superstar at the Walnut Theatre, in Philadelphia. I think maybe he’ll forget about me in my absence, but on my return from Philly, The Comedian calls to say he is now homeless. He offers to stay with my dog while I am out of the country touring in HAIR. I am grateful at the offer, but when I return six months later, I find that poor Bogie has been starving, and there is no dog food in the apartment—or people food, for that matter—only a giant bottle of cheap beer in the fridge. I toss The Comedian and his belongings out the door and never see him again.
Karen calls to tell me she has been writing Christian poetry. Do I want to hear her poems? Of course, I tell her, but I tune out her voice when she reads them to me. I am impatient to get off the phone. I don’t know what to say to her anymore. Our lives are too different. I make up an excuse and tell her I have to go—that we’ll speak again soon. She tells me she loves me, and I say it back to her, embarrassed.
VII

I meet On Again, Off Again’s German doppelgänger while on tour in Europe. Like On Again, Off Again, he’s a moody pianist and a Virgo. But mostly, he’s German. I bring him home with me, but he hates New York, so we sublet my East Village one bedroom, load up my Honda Civic and head for Nashville. I have never been a big fan of country music, but I figure Nashville will have opportunities for both of us. I start practicing my twang. Aside from a guitar-playing cousin I haven’t seen since we were both in feettie pajamas, I don’t know a soul in the Music City.

Along the way, somewhere in Kentucky, Doppelganger and I argue about something ridiculous, and he walks out of the motel room, hikes down the highway, gets a bus back to NYC and takes a plane back to Germany.

Poof. I am alone.

I turn up the radio and keep driving.

He calls me a few months later to tell me that his new wife reminds him of me. I wish him luck.

In Nashville, my life becomes a country song. I sing on songwriter demos. I enter contests in bars and live off my meager winnings. I waitress and work as a telemarketer. I have an affair with my boss—Not as Separated as He Said He Was. His wife screams profanities and attacks his car outside the window of my apartment while the neighbors peek nervously through chained doors. We get a restraining order and move across the Cumberland to the slums of East
Nashville, to the relief of the neighbors. She shows up on our doorstep the first night in the converted Victorian duplex, and I meet my new next door neighbor, an elderly woman in a bathrobe who works as a dishwasher at Opryland, when I step onto the shared porch to explain everything to the cops.

“Don’t you worry, honey. We all have our crosses to bear,” she says through her missing front teeth. “Ain’t nobody here judging you.”

My lover is an ex-bass player from L.A. He is older than my mother and has been married as many times. His teenage girls leave hateful messages on my answering machine. I pack his bags and send him back to his abandoned family when his seven year-old son is hospitalized with a heart condition.

Sometimes we deserve to be judged.

Not content to have her husband back, Angry Wife wants revenge for what I have borrowed without permission. Making my life a living Hell becomes her hobby.

One night after winning the $25 second prize in a singing contest, I am summoned to the table of a mammoth old man in a polyester gray business suit. He hands me his business card and suggests I contact him in the morning. He’s going to do great things for me—make me a big star. He has a driver with John Denver glasses and dirty blue jeans who looks like he stepped out of a 70s porn movie. When he leaves the club, the driver holds the back door of an old Cougar sedan open for his boss, then tosses his cigarette into the gutter and looks both ways before lowering himself into the white-leatherette driver’s seat and peeling out of the parking lot. I look at the business card, and it has an address on Music Row. Harry Finfer, it says.
I won’t know the whole truth about Mr. Finfer until years later, when I Google his name and find out that he had, in fact, been a big-wig in the Philadelphia music industry during the 1950s. Called upon to testify in the famous “payola” trial, his testimony helped bring down corrupt music producers and DJ’s and forever changed the way business was conducted on Tin Pan Alley and Music Row.

All I know at the time is that Harry says he is going to make me a star. Over the next few weeks, he sets out to create a “buzz” about me by appearing with me in conspicuous industry hangouts—fancy restaurants, supper clubs, recording studios. I find myself listening to Harry fawn over my demo tape in Jack Clement’s living room, Jack asks me about my background and tells me I’ll need a more country-sounding demo if I want to get a deal in Nashville. My demo was recorded in New York and lacks the “Nashville sound.” A few days later, Harry takes me to meet Alex Zinetas at his studio. Alex loves my voice and says I remind him of a young Brenda Lee—an artist he worked with extensively back in the “good ole days” when country was country. He tells me that Patsy Cline once sat right where I’m sitting now and called her agent, crying begging him to let her record one of Alex’s songs, “Emotion.” When a deal couldn’t be made, the song went to Brenda and became one of her biggest early hits.

I call my mother and tell her that things are looking up—I’ve found a producer who wants to do big things for me. I’m ecstatic for a few weeks until I begin to doubt my aging benefactor. His driver, John Denver, is told to look after me while Harry is out of town one week.

I can’t put my finger on it, but something about him bothers me, and I stop answering my phone after a few days of friendly invites to accompany him to songwriter nights or talent
shows. So far, Harry hasn’t introduced me to anyone under the age of 60, and I’m realizing that the “in” he has here in Nashville is with the music industry elite of forty years ago. True, he rubs elbows with country legends, but they have no more pull in this town than I do at this point.

The night Harry returns to town, I am signed up to sing at a contest across town from my apartment. I see John Denver first, followed by Harry at the club’s front door. I smile and wave like I’m happy to see the two of them, but I am wishing they’d just leave me alone tonight. I’ve already sung and am waiting to hear the contest results. Harry has a gift for me—an imitation Gucci watch that appears to have come from a street vendor somewhere. I thank him and notice that his hands are trembling when he fastens the claps for me. Oh, no, I think.

I win third prize, and Harry goes to the bathroom before leaving. John Denver talks incessantly the whole time he is gone. I’m guessing he’s been snorting something. He tells me how grateful he is to Harry for giving him a job and helping him move from L.A. to Nashville. He tells me he had a bit of “trouble” back in L.A.—that he’d been working for a disreputable filmmaker and ended up seeing something he shouldn’t have seen. He tells me his former boss turned out to be making “snuff” films, and when I say I don’t know what that means, he proceeds to explain until Harry returns to the table, and he has to leave to drive him home.

My heart is racing, and I want to run. I don’t want to know this horrible thing that the John Denver look-alike has just shared with me—wish desperately I could un-hear it. I did not know such evil existed in the world, and even if this guy is truly on the run from his wicked ex-boss, I never want to see him again. I am afraid to know him.

I stop answering my phone then change my number.
A few months later, I am working as a sales rep at a Christian record company, and Nice Guy sits in the cubicle across from me. We speak through the partition, and when I complain about the lack of windows in our warehouse office, he draws a picture of a window overlooking a pastoral setting and tapes it to my cubicle wall. He becomes my protector and best friend. We spend two and a half years together. We go fishing and antiquing. He teaches me blues guitar. He tries. We eat several times a week at Cracker Barrel, and I imagine us at one of the larger tables, our children playing with the peg boards in front of the stone fireplace. On holidays, we drive to his father’s house in Shreveport then visit my dad’s family and then my mom and husband number four in Texas. Everybody likes Nice Guy.

Karen wants to know if I hear wedding bells when I look at him. We’re sitting on the bleachers at the skating rink during one of my holiday visits home, watching Shannon work through an inconsistent triple axel.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe……”

Shannon is a coltish preteen beauty. She is shy around me, but she rolls her eyes and wise-cracks with her mother. Karen looks good. She’s thin again, and she has curled her hair, which is a single shade of dirty blond.

“We are best friends,” she beams, and it takes a moment to realize she’s speaking about her daughter, not me.
We meet Nice Guy for lunch, and then I wave goodbye as Karen peels out of the parking lot in her Firebird, flicking a cigarette out the window.

Back and forth I drive from Nashville to New York, New York to Nashville, Nashville to New York. I’ve sold my Honda Civic to pay for a new demo tape. I purchase an old VW van for $750 and am getting ready for my second appointment with James Stroud, a producer at Giant Records. I’m supposed to stay with Vicky and her roommate, Crazy Man, in Hoboken on my last trip back to retrieve my New York stuff out of storage. Crazy Man is a fable. Vicky’s been calling me in Nashville for weeks to tell me about his insane temper and dashing good looks. He drinks like a fish and leaves fist-sized holes in her walls, but he has a winning smile and can be very charming. He’s an ex-marine who wants to be an actor. She can’t wait for me to meet him and tell her what I think. There’s nothing romantic going on between them—yet—but it isn’t because he hasn’t tried. She wants my opinion.

He sounds like a creep, but I haven’t met him, so who am I to say?

Vick—Wake up. Vick! I think your roommate just—Oh, God. I think he just—raped me.
Months go by. One weekend night, I crumple in a heap in the corner of my room and wait for the police to arrive to search the outside of my house, where Crazy Man might be hiding, or maybe it’s the Angry Wife. I hear scratching noises on the window pane. The police come and find nothing. The danger isn’t out there. It’s in my head now.

Nice Guy tries, God bless him, to make things better. But when he touches me, I scream and elbow him in the chest. I wretch at the smell of semen. This is not encouraging to Nice Guy. I also wretch at the smell of bleach, which suddenly smells like semen to me, for some reason. I won’t do the things I used to do. I hate him for expecting me to do the things I used to do.

The STD tests they did at the hospital are negative, thank God, and my period comes, but AIDS can take years to present, and who knows what poison Crazy Man spit inside of me?

I drive three days back to Jersey to testify in front of the Grand Jury, reliving the trauma of a nightmare that had turned out to be real. I answer their prying questions about how I could not know, how many drinks I had had at the bar that night with Vicky, and at approximately what time her crazy roommate had shown up to meet me and toast my departure; about drinking something pink and frothy in a shot glass he handed to me and then barfing all the way home; about being tucked in by Vicky on the living room sofa and how my dog Bogie was asleep on my feet the whole time and never budged or barked as Crazy Man lifted my dress, pulled my underwear to the side and—did what he did; about how it was a dream of being invaded, and I
tried to call out, “No!” but my lips would not move, and then I woke up later and saw him on the floor beside the sofa, asleep at my feet, and how it wasn’t until I went to pee and wiped myself that I knew it had really happened because there was semen all over the toilet paper, which I first felt and then, in the dark, sniffed before realizing it was true.

The Grand Jury indicts Crazy Man and the DA’s high-five each other in the hallway.

I drive three days back to Nashville, join a rape support group, and cancel my appointments with record label execs because I cannot bear to be alone with strange men. In truth, I cannot bear to be alone with any man, including Nice Guy. I begin locking my bedroom door at night and placing a chair against the doorknob. I buy a six pack of beer and watch reruns of Dick Van Dyke on Nick at Nite until the sun comes up.

I have no memory of penetration—only of the sensation of having my underwear moved and the wetness that followed. The rape kit found plenty of evidence—semen, hairs—on the outside of my vagina, but by the time I was seen four hours after arriving at the hospital (there were two rapes and one birth ahead of me in the ER that morning) I had peed twice. The inside of my vagina was clean.

The DA wants me to say “penetration” at the trial, but I can’t. It is months later, maybe a year, and I have been better lately—returned to school as an undergraduate in an English program (so that I would not have to face going through a job interview, which could land me alone in an office with a man), settled into a sort of platonic normalcy with Nice Guy, have even picked up my guitar a few times. Now, there is an offer on the table from the room next door, where Crazy Man waits with his lawyer.
“Criminal Sexual Contact,” my Basset-eyed attorney says, sheepishly. “It’s still under the federal statute, so one more mistake—I mean, if this guy so much as runs a traffic light—he’s back in jail.”

“He raped me,” I whisper, through clenched teeth, and the trembling starts up again, and I feel like I might throw up.

“But I’m afraid we can’t prove it. Not without evidence of penetration. I’m sorry. If you could just remember…”

We have already been through this. The truth is damning enough, horrible enough. But I won’t lie and say I remember something I don’t remember. And the evidence proves everything but penetration—proves, if they believe my story, that I was unconscious and didn’t know this guy from Adam—criminal sexual conduct.

“Rape,” I repeat. “He raped me.”

“Okay, then,” he sighs. “We’ll go for rape. But I have to ask you……please don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s going to be your word against his here. Is there anything about your past you have not told me yet? Anything that might sway the jurors in his favor or make them believe his story, that it was consensual?”

“No,” I say, then, “Wait…”

“I used to be a Playboy Bunny. Is that the sort of thing you mean? I was a waitress at the Playboy Empire Club. I wore ears and a pink costume and high heels. It was a fancy waitress job, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry,” he says, and I can tell that he really, really is.
I write out my victim’s statement, and the DA asks that Crazy Man be required to read it aloud in front of the judge with his parents in the courtroom. I stay inside the chamber until he returns to give me the news: Guilty of Criminal Sexual Conduct, first offense, three years of probation, civic duty, a fine, and one slip up will send the scum back to jail. Oh. And the asshole cried and said he was sorry when he read the letter. Told the judge he was drunk at the time, so the judge ordered him into alcohol treatment, as well.


Back in Nashville, I write papers, go to school, join a bluegrass ensemble. I go fishing with Nice Guy. Things are better. Then one day a woman cuts me off in traffic on the freeway, and I lose my shit and start screaming and smiling and swerving my car through all the lanes. I pull off the road and cry until I’m sick. When I get home, my legs won’t stop shaking. I curl up in a ball on my bed and want to die. The phone rings. It’s On Again, Off Again. His latest girlfriend, 20 years his junior, has dumped him, and he just wants to talk.

Two weeks later, I move back in New York. This is when I find out I’m pregnant.
“Well, this is interesting,” says Nice Guy on the phone, a thousand miles away. When my silence hangs between us on the line like a dangling teardrop, he adds, “Well, I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have a baby with than you, if you’ll still have me.”

It’s an almost proposal. A few days later, I receive an almost engagement ring in the mail, a pretty amethyst set in gold, along with a card that says, “I love you. Be mine?”

Something short of Paradise.

Here’s the plan we come up with. He has to travel for work over the next several weeks, but he’ll come up in October to help move me back to Nashville. In the meantime, we will both buy books about pregnancy, parenting, what to expect and what to eat, how to be good parents, etc. We’ll use the time apart to become experts, to get ready. In the meantime, I find a sub-letter. My friend from California says she’ll take over my lease, and she moves everything across the country and stays with me until Nice Guy arrives. I buy a bunch of pregnancy books and start cramming. And then I start throwing up—everywhere, all day, every day. I have lived on M&Ms and Diet Coke for most of my adult life and now, at 31, I put myself on something called the Best Odds diet. Only I’m confused about portion sizes, and my six helpings of broccoli and spinach won’t stay down. I’m force-feeding myself vegetables until I wretch at the word, “vegetable.”
On Again, Off Again takes me out to a fancy restaurant for dinner, and when I excuse myself to barf and return to the table all sweaty and green, he tells me how cute I am pregnant and that he is jealous and wishes it were his.

“Too late,” I say.

He walks me 30 blocks home because I can’t stomach a cab ride, and now that I am inaccessible, I’m interesting again.

Doppleganger calls from Germany to tell me his wife is pregnant, too. We promise to introduce our children to each other someday and watch them play.

Karen calls to say it’s about time and how she knew from the moment she met him it would be Nice Guy. Also to suck on ginger for the nausea and let her know as soon as I find out if it’s a boy or a girl. She has boxes of used baby clothes she can send me.

A week before Nice Guy is to arrive my friend from California takes me to my OB-GYN appointment so she can be there with me to see the heartbeat on my first ultrasound.

Only there isn’t one.

What is left is a sack, with nothing inside. The baby is gone. Evaporated.

“These things happen, dear. But don’t worry. You’re not too old to try again,” says the lab technician.

I go to Beth Israel for the D&C the next day, and my friend stays with me when I come home to a cold apartment. The weather has turned, and the heat has not been turned on yet. She
wraps me in blankets and sits in the kitchen with her feet on a plug-in radiator, reading a book while I sleep. When I wake up, mice are scampering across my windowsill. I watch them from far, far away, though they are right in front of my face.

That night, I call Nice Guy to let him off the hook. He is quiet, and I can’t read his expression, but I think I detect a frosty edge when he says, “Well, if you still want me to come up there, I will.”

A few weeks later, I rent a U-Haul, attach a trailer with my VW van on the back, and make my way back to Nashville—loaded to the brim with every possession I own. The wedding is on, baby or no. My dear friend from California has taken over my apartment and is hanging homemade curtains as I drive the 18 hours to what is to be the next exciting chapter of my life.

Nice Guy meets me at the curb and gives me a careful hug. He suggests we leave the unloading for now and go out to dinner at our favorite Mexican food place. Through dinner, I chatter nervously. He looks at me with a sad expression and doesn’t say very much, which just makes me talk more. He pays the check, and we head back to his place where, once again, he recommends leaving the unloading until the morning. After all, I must be really tired, and we have so much to talk about. Tomorrow is another day.

When I snuggle up to him in bed, he turns away from me. I ask him if anything is wrong, and he takes a deep breath and tells me he has just learned he has Hepatitis C and might die. He’s contagious with intimate contact. He’s pretty sure he got it from the “Blues” tattoo he has been sporting on his forearm since the late 70s. I need to be tested. Whether I have it or not, he wants to call off the wedding. He wants me to return to New York in the morning.

This isn’t happening.
No, I tell him. Of course we’ll go through this together—whatever the case. In sickness and in health, I say. I know nothing about this illness, other than what he has just told me, and I want to study it, to find out what’s in store. He says he’s very tired and we’ll talk about it tomorrow. He turns off the lights, and I hold him until he falls asleep, then I sneak out of the house and drive to the nearest open bar—a chain restaurant that is popular with the singles crowd on weekend nights. I just need to think. And drink. I order a white wine and ignore the smiling bartender who tries to make small talk with me. I order another, then squeeze myself into the phone booth and call Vicky, who asks me what I’m going to do. I don’t know, I say. He wants me to leave. She thinks he’s just testing me, giving me an out if I want one—because who wouldn’t want one, hearing this news? I call my mom, who tells me to take the out and move on with my life. He’s telling me to go, and I should go. I don’t call Karen because I don’t remember her phone number, and I don’t have my phone book. But I know what she’d say—stay with Nice Guy. Have kids. Pray. Hope for the best. God works in mysterious ways.

Without speaking to her, I decide to take Karen’s advice. I swallow a third glass of white wine and weave my way back to Nice Guy’s place. Alone, in the dark, I unload most of the contents in my van into the living room. Then I climb the stairs and crawl into the bed beside him. I snuggle up to his body and whisper, “Okay. I’m in.”

He is sitting on the edge of the bed looking at my face when I wake up. There are tears in his eyes.

“I want you to go,” he says.

“I’m not leaving,” I tell him. “I’m not going anywhere.”
He repeats, “I want you to go back to New York today.”

He won’t do it—won’t have a family that he may not be able to support, won’t risk making me sick, doesn’t want to deal with the responsibility of a marriage or children when he can hardly make it through each day. He’s exhausted. It takes all of his will just to get out of bed each morning. The doctors say there are experimental treatments—interferon, new trial medications—but the disease is debilitating and often fatal. He doesn’t want to put me through it, doesn’t want to have to worry about what I’m going through when he’s sick. He just needs to take care of himself right now.

“Go back to New York,” he repeats.

I lose it. I scream at him, accuse him of being selfish, afraid of living. I tell him he got sick to avoid growing up, to run away from his commitments. I say horrible things, and I weep into the bed covers. He remains quiet. He lets me rant until I have no rant left, then he offers to help me reload the van.

“Fuck you!” I scream. I hurl the door open and march back and forth from the living room to the van, shoving my belongings back inside willy-nilly. He tries to help, and I grab my things out of his hands and push him away. I tell him he’s too sick to be loading stuff—to just leave it to me. I can do it without him. I can do everything without him.

He watches helplessly as I fill the moving van one angry armful at a time. He stands by the curb and cries, “I’m sorry,” over and over again.

“Yes, you are,” I say.
When the van is loaded, I slam the doors shut and throw the padlock on. I tell Nice Guy I have to use the bathroom before I go, since I’ll be driving all day, and navigating the moving van in and out of rest stops with the trailer on the back is near impossible. In the bathroom, I look at my red, swollen eyes in the mirror. I wipe my face with a washcloth and sweep my long hair into a topknot. When I open the door, he is standing there, crying. He reaches out to me and takes me into his arms. We hold each other until the tears stop, then he tells me he loves me and he’s sorry.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask. “Are you really, really sure this is what you want?”

“I’m not sure about anything,” he says. “But I do know want you to go back to New York for now.”

I climb up into the driver’s seat and start the engine.

“Are you sure?” I ask again.

“I’m sure,” he says. “Go.”

I start the engine and wait for him to change his mind. He turns away and walks inside his house, closes the door. I gun the engine a few times, and when I see him looking at me through the curtains, I pull away slowly, hoping he’ll come running after me. But he doesn’t.

At a truck stop just out of town, I pull over and make one last ditch effort. I call him from the phone booth and say, one more time, “Are you sure?”

His voice is like ice. “Go. Please don’t call again. Go back to New York. I want you to go. I mean it.”
I hang up and scream inside the glass walls until I see truckers giving me worried looks over their shoulders from the gas tanks. Before any one of them decides to check on me, I pull myself back into the driver’s seat, wipe tears and snot with the back of my hand, turn up the radio, and head for the highway, leaving Nashville the same way I came to town three years before—alone, broken-hearted.

Then I remember—my friend from California. She has just moved across the country with all of her belongings and has made curtains for her/my apartment. What will I tell her? Where will she go? I call her from a hotel room in Virginia and explain the mess. She listens quietly. What can she say? I’m in tears. Left at the altar. Abandoned. Pathetic, again. Not pregnant. Not engaged. Homeless. She says we’ll figure something out and we can be roomies for a while—it’ll be fun. We’ll make it work. I hang on to her words and ignore the forced enthusiasm in her voice.

I call Vicky to tell her the latest, and she commiserates, adding, with humor, that I might be the unluckiest person she knows. I laugh through my tears until I cannot breathe. Thank God for Vicky. I call my mom and cry and cry. She tells me it’s all for the best, even if I can’t see it now. She never believed I was really in love with Nice Guy anyway and thought I was sort of settling. As nice as he was, she says, he just didn’t seem right for me somehow. I am too tired to argue, and besides, maybe she’s right, I think. She’s right, I know. But I am feeling too sorry for myself to see the good in things right now. Bogie, who is now 17 and deaf and blind with cataracts, had weathered the 18 hour drive to Nashville without too much complaint, but now that we’re back on the road, he’s coughing and trembling. He is allergic to flea bites and has developed a smelly skin condition that keeps him thumping and slurping at his body all night long. He isn’t eating, and his little legs are so weak he can hardly stand. I ball up one of my shirts
for him and place it beside the bed. He circles and scratches the fabric then curls himself into a mangy ball and falls asleep. I know what I will have to do when we get back to the city, and I don’t know if I can live through it.

My second night on the road, somewhere in the mountains, I pull into a cheap motel parking lot during a rain storm, only to find myself trapped at the dead end of a dark driveway that faces a row of dark, attached wooden shacks connected by a corrugated steel sloped awning. It’s 2am, and I am gunning the engine in reverse, spinning the van’s tires on the muddy, broken asphalt, trying to turn around so I can get back onto the highway and away from this Alfred Hitchcock set. I am aware of the noise I am making, but I can’t help it, and in trying to reverse the trailer, I’ve managed to jackknife the truck on the broken sliver of pavement. I’m breaking a sweat when I see first one, then several dim yellow lights flip on inside the weathered strip of shacks. A door opens, then another and another. My stomach tightens. Soon, my van is surrounded by a colorful array of barefoot, sleepy-looking men wearing nothing but pajama pants or boxers—no shirts. Two Hispanic men with bed hair approach the passenger door. A thick-waisted black man in drooping BVDs squints through the glare of my headlights. He approaches my window and knocks.

My heart is in my throat. I’m surrounded by half-naked, irritated men in the middle of the night in the parking lot of an abandoned motel, and I am helplessly stuck. The motel office is closed. I don’t know what I was thinking pulling in here in the first place. It looked like there was a circular drive, but I was wrong, and now I’ve woken up the migrant workers who live behind the main building. I smile and lower my window, just a bit.
“I’m so, so sorry!” I tell the sweaty man, who peers inside at my Bogie, sleeping beside me on the passenger seat. “I didn’t realize it was a dead end. I’m trying to turn around, but it appears I’m stuck.”

The men on the passenger side speak to each other in Spanish, and I have no idea what they are saying, but one of them looks at the VW van on the trailer behind the truck I’m driving and whistles as he scratches his head. They talk to each other some more, and then they laugh. I’m grateful they’re laughing at me instead of being angry that I’ve woken them up, but I wish I could understand what they’re saying.

The man with the loose BVD’s says, “Get out.”

“What?” I ask, swallowing hard.

“I’ll turn her around, lady. Just get out. Let me jump in there.”

“Oh,” I say. I’m trying to think fast but I’m so exhausted I can think of no better idea to float. I tell him to please try not to wake my dog (as if the decrepit peek-a-poo might be harboring an inner Rottweiler that would come to my defense if need be), and I open the truck door and hop down to the ground.

The black man hollers something in Spanish to the Mexican guys, and I back up a bit and stand in the tall grass beside the broken driveway as the truck lurches forward, then back, then forward and to the right, then back and to the left again. One man watches the left tail light and screams instructions to the driver while the other man stands in front of the right headlight and motions the van to and fro until there is a final gunning of the engine and a heart-stopping lurch. The left rear tire flips itself forward and lands momentarily off the pavement. The sweating black
man shoves the truck into first gear and the engine makes a monstrous sound, then the truck and trailer are facing the highway.

“Wow! Thank you!” I scream. I jump up and down and throw my arms into the air, “Whoohoo!”

He man jumps down to the pavement and tugs at his PJ bottoms to cover his exposed crack. The other men wave and head back towards the shacks, shaking their sleepy heads at the annoying white lady who can’t drive her moving van.

I offer to pay the man in the BVD’s, but he waves me away and says, “Naw. That’s all right, lady.”

He turns his back on me with a dismissive wave and heads back to his bed. I have never felt as much gratitude in my life. I think about how tired they’ll be in the morning when they have to go to work doing whatever it is they do. Angels unawares, I think.

I pull back out onto the highway and drive until I find a motel with a circular drive and an office with lots of bright lights, check into a room and fall asleep on top of the covers with Bogie in my arms. When I wake up, the sun is shining through the curtains I forgot to close. I smile because I know I’m going to be okay.
When I pull the moving van onto St. Mark’s Place, I am greeted by the several friends I’ve called, including On Again, Off Again. They welcome me home and unload every scrap of furniture, box of books, and suitcase full of clothing and haul it all up the narrow steps into my apartment. They tell me to call if I need anything, offer to take me out to dinner, the movies, or just to be there if I need to talk. I hug each one and thank them for being there. My friend from California and I eat Chinese food using my boxes as a table that night. Outside, thunder claps and bolts of lightning zap the fire escape stairs in the alley way. We shy away from the windows and hole up in the living room together, talking about all we’ve been through and wondering if our dreams of romance and stardom will ever come true. I feel bad for letting her down, even if it isn’t my fault, but she’s magnanimous about the whole thing. She gives me the bed and takes up residence on my sofa for several weeks until she finds a beautiful two bedroom in a brand new high-rise on West 57th Street. The actors and artist housing development is rent subsidized, with built-in dishwashers, washers and dryers. Her corner apartment on the 27th floor overlooks the city, and there is a private film screening room on the ground floor. The tenants even receive free or discounted tickets to Broadway shows. I take comfort in her good fortune and let go of the guilt I had felt for returning to my apartment so quickly.

I transfer to the New School for Social Research for two semesters, where I study the literature of the Bronte sisters, women’s writing, flash fiction, and memoir. My grandmother dies during finals week, and the doctor tells me I have a sinus infection that precludes flight, so I write my grandmother a long letter and send it to my mother, who reads it at the funeral, then
places it in the coffin with her. A day or two later, I pour Bogie a bowl full of food and watch as he collapses in front of it, unable to stand up long enough to eat. I lift him gently and carry him across to West 9th street to his vet. He is calm and snuggles into my arms as we walk. He cannot see or hear, but he sniffs at the breeze that gently blows the tufts of white fur from his eyes.

I stay with his body for a half hour after he is gone, crying and thanking him for being such a good dog. I tell him I love him. The vet returns and asks what I’d like to do with the body. She explains to me that I can have him buried in a pet graveyard and pay for the upkeep of his tomb, or I can have him cremated, individually (which costs more) or along with other people’s pets (the cheapest option, which is still a small fortune.) I tell her I don’t know what to do, and she suggests I leave him with her until I decide. They will keep him on ice.

I walk home empty. I call Vicky, and she cries with me. We come up with a plan. She knows of a beautiful state forest where we can take him and bury him. We’ll give him a little graveside service and make a little tombstone marker so I can come visit him anytime I want. It’s illegal, but because it is still a few weeks until spring, there won’t be anyone around, so we shouldn’t have any problems.

I borrow a large shovel from the old lady who lives in the building next door and has a backyard garden. I explain my plan, and she wishes me luck but reminds me that it is against the law to bury pets in a public place in New York State. I tell her I know, but I’m going to do it, anyway. Besides, we’re going to Jersey.

Bogie’s body is packed inside a Styrofoam freezer box. Vicky and I drive to a state park in Ringwood, New Jersey—a popular destination for hikers and climbers during the spring and summer months, but empty now, when the treetops are still covered with a thin layer of snow.
The box is not heavy, but it is awkward to carry. The shovel is gigantic. Vicky and I take turns trading the box and shovel back and forth as we make our way to what appears to us to be a secluded spot overlooking a valley in the thick forest.

“Here,” I say. “This is the spot. He’d like this spot.”

We take turns digging, but the ground is slushy and partially frozen, so we are making little headway as the light grows dimmer. We hear animal sounds and imagine bobcats and bears lurking behind the trees. We drop to our knees in the mud and dig with our hands and sharp rocks, finally carving out a hole just deep enough to lower the Styrofoam box inside. We shove a few handfuls of dirt over the box, then pat it down with the shovel until it’s just a tiny mound. We throw pine needles over the mound to disguise the tiny, fresh grave. It’s getting dark, and we really have to get back to the car, but I want to say a few words, like we’d planned. Vicky gives me a worried look but then agrees to a mini-service. I do the “Here lies Bogie, beloved dog…” bit, and then I place a note underneath a stone on top of the mound, just in case some forest ranger should find the grave and be curious. With one final look around, I tell Bogie goodbye, and we head back to the car.

Back on St. Mark’s Place, I am self-conscious in my muddy overalls, carrying the giant shovel down the city street, but nobody even looks at me. This strikes me as funny, and even though I am still crying, I start to laugh. When no one notices the hysterical me covered from head to toe in dirt, laughing and crying, carrying the large shovel down the street, my mirth overcomes my grief, and again, I know I’ll be okay.

Back at the apartment, Karen calls. I tell her about Nice Guy, my grandmother, Bogie. She says Nice Guy didn’t mean it—that he’ll be back; that I should have stayed with him. I tell
her no, he meant it. He didn’t want me. She says he just loved me so much he wanted to spare me, that’s all. She’s sorry about my grandmother, my dog, that I won’t be getting married, having kids. She hopes things will work out. I am eager to get off the phone. Once again, I feel the disconnect. And something else now—jealousy. And a bottomless emptiness.

My friend from California has joined a church and attends bible study every week. She’s waitressing and taking acting classes at The Actor’s Studio. She performs in off-off-Broadway showcases. She gets an agent. She invites me to Christmas Eve services and tries to set me up with a friend of hers who is recently out of a long-term relationship and has also been feeling blue. I attend the service and feel sorry for myself while watching the children’s choir sing. I will probably never have kids now, I think. I’ll be alone forever. Her friend is nice-looking, polite, but I feel no spark, and when we all end up back at her new apartment, he talks about his film credits. He’s too eager to please—a bit of a show-off, I think. Only it isn’t me he’s showing off for—it’s her. Within a few months, they’re engaged. I’m happy for my friend, but her engagement sends me spiraling. I can’t get out of bed. I can’t eat. I can’t think. Vicky suggests I see someone, so I make an appointment with a counselor at the school.

“Have you had any recent stressors?” she wants to know. I start laughing then burst into tears and blurt out the whole, sorry tale—everything from the rape, through the sick fiancé, dead grandmother and dead dog. She prescribes Trazadone and tells me to meet with her twice a week until I’m feeling better.

The pills work. I feel happy—maybe for the first time ever. Colors are brighter. Sounds are musical. Food tastes good. I have grand, wonderful thoughts—though I am completely unable to sit still long enough to read or write. Instead, I shop. I get a Sears credit card, and I go
shopping. I ride my bike to the Path train and carry it down the endless stairs. I carry it up on the Jersey side, then I ride to the shopping mall to buy kitchen gadgets, new sheets, stuff I don’t need. I do this a few times a week until my credit card is full of charges I have no way to pay.

My friend from California invites me to her wedding. I invite On Again, Off Again to be my date. We have been seeing each other a bit, and things are becoming serious again, much to everyone’s dismay. Though my heart has been smashed to bits again and again by this man enough times to know better, I feel confident and optimistic these days. I am not afraid. I am invincible. I take a test and receive a partial scholarship to attend the Literature and Writing program at Columbia University’s School of General Studies. I cover the rest of my tuition with student loans and work as a singing waitress and bartender three nights a week. On Again, Off Again plays the piano while I perch on the baby grand and sing. I adopt an Old English sheepdog mix and name him Hugo, after my favorite author, Victor.

Karen calls and tells me to “Go for it,” that must really love me if he keeps coming back after all these years. Maybe my dreams will finally come true.

I stop taking the Trazadone because I can’t focus, and I really need to focus now that I’m at Columbia. Also because it makes me shop too much. And because somewhere, down deep inside, a tiny voice inside my head is screaming at me to slow down—that I’m headed for trouble.

But for a couple of years, things are nice—calm. Hugo and I bounce back and forth between St. Mark’s Place and the Upper West Side. On Again, Off Again and I have settled into a grown-up sort of domesticity. I have my drawer again. We make love without toys, watch movies in bed, make music, talk and snuggle. We leave work together and wake up with each
other. He brings me breakfast in bed. He reads my writing and offers suggestions. We see shows
and attend parties together. We have dinner with his parents, who seem happy to have me back
in the picture. We visit my mom in La Jolla and talk about marriage and children and how it
would be nice to be able to afford a family someday. But it’s always “someday.”

Then a young woman wearing a miniskirt and go-go boots starts showing up at our gigs. She has a boyfriend she fawns over while we sing, but there’s something about the way On Again, Off Again looks at her that sounds a tiny alarm deep inside of my head. I shush it and try
to listen to my heart instead, but pretty soon our mutual friends start hinting at things. They want
to know if I’m seeing anyone else. They suggest perhaps I should be. They tell me that Miniskirt
showed up alone last night at the bar all sad and beat up by her boyfriend and how On Again, Off Again took her upstairs to the closed cabaret room during his breaks. She stayed until closing.

He insists she’s just a friend and says not to listen to the others—they’re just jealous and
have no lives of their own to talk about, so they stir up gossip. He worries about her, that’s all.
Her heroin addict boyfriend broke her arm and gave her a black eye, the scum. The girl needs a
keeper, he says. He’s just trying to be a friend.

I make up my mind to believe him, but the rumors keep coming, and when he calls to
cancel our Valentine’s night plans, telling me about a job he agreed to do at the last minute, I
don’t believe him and tell him so. I ask him to make his choice—her, or me. He insists there’s
nothing going on, but he says maybe we do need a break from each other, come to think of it. He
says he should be ready to make a commitment by now, but since he isn’t after all these years,
there must be something wrong. He needs time to work things out—time alone.

I say these words: “Don’t lose me. This time, it will be forever.”
After a moment of silence, he says, “I understand.”

And that’s it. We’re done.

Six weeks later, Miniskirt moves into his apartment. A week after that, a bar buddy who has been listening to me complain about On Again, Off Again for three years, asks me out on a date. Three weeks later, he moves in with me. Six months later, he proposes. A year later, we are married. Hugo is our ring bearer and bites one of my bride’s maids after the ceremony.

I get my BA and a well-paying job as a children’s newspaper editor. I commute to work from the East Village to South Jersey five days a week, and when I find out I am pregnant a year later, we move to a two bedroom house on the Jersey Shore—one block from the Sandy Hook bay, with a view of lower Manhattan on clear days.

Karen calls to tell me she’s going to be a grandmother. Shannon is 17 years old and has recently returned home after having run away. There is some confusion about who the father of the baby is, but Karen is excited to have a grandson on the way. She promises to send baby clothes in a few months.

My office relocates to Northern Jersey, and I find myself commuting an hour and a half again, but in the opposite direction. When I begin spotting in my second trimester, my OBGYN orders bed rest, and I take a leave of absence and sit around the house watching shows like A Baby’s Story on cable all day. Karen calls to tell me all about her new grandson, Sean. She describes the labor and birth, the baby’s dimensions, feeding schedule, temperament. The old
disconnect is gone. I hang on her every word, anticipating my son’s arrival and thrilling at every 
flutter inside my belly. I tell her to send pictures and outgrown onesies. She promises she will.

One night, she calls in tears, asking for prayers. Shannon has been in a horrible car 
accident and is in an induced coma. If she comes out of it alive, there may be brain damage. But 
there is no guarantee she will live. I don’t know what to say. This is horrible, and it frightens me. 
How can something so awful happen so soon after something so wonderful? I ask her about her 
grandson, and she tells me he is fine and will live with her and Tim until, God willing, Shannon 
is able to care for him. She sends me insurance photos of the mangled car, and I agree it’s a 
miracle Shannon even lived through the accident.

Two weeks before my son’s due date, my father, who has struggled with bipolar disorder 
for 30 years, commits suicide. My son is born two weeks late, via C-section. A few weeks later, 
a close friend dies of Diabetic shock two weeks before his 21st birthday. And then the World 
Trade Center is attacked. I hold my son and watch the smoke column across the bay from my 
front yard for weeks. I have lost the ability to know what I am feeling at any given moment.

Karen sends a box of baby clothes for my son, and I call to thank her and compare baby 
notes. Her daughter has been released from the hospital, but she isn’t the same. She has a shunt 
in her brain to drain the fluids in her skull and relieve the constant pressure from the injury. She 
will spend months in rehabilitation and will speak with difficulty in awkward, hesitant phrases. 
The brain injury renders her unable to care for herself or her son, and Karen and Tim find 
themselves full-time parents once again—caring for their injured daughter and raising an infant.

When my son is two, we take him to Texas to meet my family. The day before head back 
home, we spend a few hours at Karen’s house, and the boys play together while we catch up.
Shannon is doing better and will be able to live on her own soon. She still has the shunt and has struggled with occasional infections that put her back into the hospital for weeks at a time, but she is speaking more clearly and can even drive again. Her hair is growing back in after the latest shave left her partially bald. She is in good spirits, and Karen seems happy to have her family around her. She and Shannon drive us to the airport. She puffs a cigarette and waves goodbye as my family rides the bus from the rental car lot to the terminal. It is the last time I will see either of them alive.

A year later, the phone rings in the middle of the night. It is a sound I have come to dread. It’s Karen. Shannon had been in another car accident—hit head on by a truck that crossed the divider line on the highway just around the corner from her house. She is in another coma, and they don’t expect her to make it. She doesn’t.

The next time we visit Texas with my kids, I call Karen on the day before we are supposed to leave, hoping we can meet for lunch, but I can’t understand what she says on the phone. Her speech is slurry. I tell her I love her and that we’ll have to take a rain check on getting together.

When the phone rings again three years later, I am packing for another family road trip. It’s Karen’s husband. She’s gone.

I had spoken with her a few times since our last visit—after my daughter was born, late one night when she was having trouble sleeping because she missed Shannon so much, when her grandson’s father’s family tried to gain custody of the child—but my life was full. There were things that needed doing, places the kids needed to be, a part-time reporting job, birthday parties to attend, day care drop offs, play dates, Mommy and me classes. I was taking Zoloft, and her
calls threatened to drag me back into the pit of despair I had only recently climbed out of. I couldn’t risk it. My children needed me. I held my breath, kept my distance. Her misery was too great—I couldn’t let it touch me. It was a sucking vortex, and I was swimming for my life.

I kept the conversations short, didn’t ask her why her speech was slurred. I knew she had lung disease and was taking pain killers. I knew she was still smoking, in spite of her doctor’s warning that she would be dead within the year if she didn’t quit. I may have said something about being there for her grandson—how much he needed her to live and be well, but I did not beg her to stay alive.

When I find out she is dead, my initial reaction is relief. Now the pain will go away, I think. Her path has come to an end. Her pain is gone for good.
Truth Be Told

There is an old Yiddish proverb: *A half-truth is a whole lie.* My kids have never asked how my father died or how their dad’s father died (the same way, when my husband was 12). I have not told them and have no idea what I’ll say when the time comes, but it will probably be a lie. I tell fun stories about my dad—about how much he loved to fish and the time we caught a hammerhead shark in Galveston Bay and couldn’t get it out of the boat and he screamed louder than I did; how he was great at telling ghost stories and scaring me and my half-sister and half-brother out of our wits; about what a great sense of humor he had and how silly he could be. I talk about what an honorable man he was and how much he loved being a Texan; how he had shelves of books on the Rangers and the Civil War and military history; how he had a .22 Western-style six shooter and would take it out back and “kill cans” and spin it around on his finger before popping it back in the leather holster. Then I stop talking.

What does it mean to tell the truth? Seeing as how truth is subjective, and everyone has her own perception of reality, is there really such a thing as *absolute* truth? Are the stories we tell each other about who we are reflections of our actual experience, or are we programmed to define ourselves within the parameters of a certain expectation? Is truth-telling merely a matter of getting all the details straight, or is it more important to convey the underlying intention when sharing our tales? Do embellishments make a story false? If you’re a newscaster, for instance, and you embellish upon actual happenings, rearrange a few details to make a story cleaner and more easily understood, are you unreliable? Suppose you invent details about an event that actually happened to someone else and then insert yourself into the story, just to make the experience more compelling to viewers? Does that make your story a lie? What about that favorite uncle who embellishes family tales. Is he to be trusted?
People are quick to judge and dismiss liars. They enjoy hearing the uncle embellish, but they will condemn the newscaster for delivering as news anything but the facts, even if the creative version of the story is more enlightening and opens the imagination to the truthful foundation of a story. There are red lines, and there are moveable red lines. We will accept embellishment from some, but not from others.

Forget about embellishments—what about omissions? Does leaving out part of the story make you a liar? Perhaps it depends on who you are and what you’re leaving out. Let’s say you’re a mom, and you present one face to your family, but there’s a secret part of you who knows that expression they see is nothing more than muscle memory. Are you a liar? Are you a reliable source? Are you who they think you are?

According to Stephen King, “Only enemies speak the truth; friends and lovers lie endlessly, caught in the web of duty.” People generally think “web of lies,” or “web of confusion,” but King’s quote flips the expectation – enemies speak the truth, friends and lovers lie because they are “caught in a web of duty.” The word duty is defined both as a “moral or legal obligation, responsibility” and as a “task one must perform.” To be caught in a web of duty, then, implies a sort of imprisonment, a sense of being trapped by obligation, responsibility or an endless task. I certainly don’t like to think of my friends and family in those terms, do you? After all, we choose our friends, and they choose us. We love our family, and they love us. We are, though, duty-bound to those we love.

A conversation from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s children’s story The Little Prince resonates with this theme. When the little prince seeks to tame a fox he has found in a wheat field, the fox tells him, “If you tame me, then we shall need each other...People have forgotten this truth, but you mustn’t forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.” This is true of the fox that sits in a wheat field, waiting, day after day, for his little prince to return. It is also true, I believe, of close friends, lovers, husbands and children. When we are responsible for someone, we are duty-bound and obligated. We are
only free to choose what we have, so we affirm the choices we have already made, loudly, with conviction.

I ask: Is telling the truth always a good thing?

Legendary choreographer and dancer Martha Graham said, “The body never lies,” but I know for a fact that statement is false. Bodies lie all the time. Bodies will tell you you’re hungry, even when you’re not. They’ll convince you to make love to the wrong mate. A menopausal body will tell you it is hot when it just isn’t.

My friend Andrew died of insulin shock two weeks before what would have been his 21st birthday because of a lie his body told him. This happened to be six weeks after I had given birth to my first child, who arrived two weeks late via emergency C-section because my body had pulled the wool over my OBGYN’s eyes, apparently. It was also eight weeks after I missed my father’s memorial service in Texas and nine weeks after he had lost his battle with bipolar disorder and shot himself in the head, even though he and his body had convinced his doctor and his family he was okay. His doctor said he’d seen “no signs of suicidal ideation or depression” at his last visit. His instincts had been wrong. My father wasn’t fooled, though. Two weeks prior to killing himself, he’d called me to tell me he’d been “feeling down.” With only my own experience to reference, I suggested he might be suffering from seasonal affective disorder—SAD—and things would be better in the Spring, when his first grandson would arrive and he could take the Bass boat out on the lake to fish. He said that wasn’t it, and he was right. He told me he hoped I’d get everything I wanted, and I pretended not to know that this would be the last time I heard his voice.

When you lose a parent, there is the initial grief, and then there is a weird sense of relief that the worst has already happened. Nothing could be worse than this. You don’t have to worry anymore. It’s
over. But one should never say the words, “It can’t get any worse” out loud. The beginning of 2001 was truly awful. But it turned out to be mere foreshadowing.

Because I was so close to my due date when my father died, I wasn’t allowed to fly and missed my father’s memorial. So it was very important to me not to miss my friend Andrew’s life “celebration” in New York. (Cabaret performers never mourn the death of one of their own—they celebrate the life with songs and cheeky, tearful tributes). Aside from a weigh-in visit to the pediatrician and a trip to the breast-feeding specialist (never could quite get the hang of it and gave up after the weigh-in, which indicated my son was starving in his attempts to pull nourishment from my swollen, hard, useless breasts), I had not left our tiny new cottage by the Sandy Hook Bay since giving birth to my son. The thought of leaving my baby with my husband for the several hours it would take to travel by ferry into Manhattan, attend the memorial and return home was enough to put me into full panic mode, suffering as I was (I later found out) from PTSD. Still, I donned some stretchy black pants and a loose-fitting Chico’s “Traveler” top, put makeup on my face for the first time in a year and kissed my son goodbye before repeating the hundred or so instructions I thought my husband would need to keep my baby alive while I was gone.

My infant son had already survived near-starvation and being dropped on his head his first night home, when, heavily drugged with pain medication, I had fallen asleep breast-feeding him and awakened in the middle of the night to the strange sight of my Old English Sheepdog sniffing a tiny blue bundle on the plush carpet beside the sofa. It had taken a thick moment of mentally sifting through my new reality to recall the bundle’s importance, and when I realized what had happened, rather than call to my husband, who was peacefully snoring upstairs in the bedroom, I picked up my baby, shushed his startled cries with kisses, then placed him into his infant car seat for safe-keeping before falling back into my narcotic stupor until early the next morning. I awakened to the sound of my husband making coffee in the kitchen.
“How’s my baby boy?” he asked, leaning over the car seat to kiss our sleeping son’s forehead.

“Okay, I guess,” I answered. “I only dropped him on his head once.”

Nonplussed, my ever-steady husband chuckled. “Well, he’s still breathing, so I guess he’s okay.”

I will blame my non-alarm on the medication. I have no idea what my husband’s excuse was for not rushing our child to the ER to make sure he hadn’t suffered a concussion or worse. Perhaps instead of pumping the necessary adrenaline through his system to indicate “Emergency!” his own body had told him a little fib and filled him with calming, “Happy Daddy” endorphins. Denial is a comforting falsehood and an effective self-preserving mechanism. He wasn’t worried.

Instead of the terror I should have experienced, what I felt was a sense of helplessness and stifled rage that I had been left alone to shoulder the sole burden of keeping this tiny living being alive. I was stitched from hip to hip across my belly and could hardly move without searing pain, even with the medications. And yet I was supposed to wake up every two hours through the night, hobble to the bassinet, lift my crying son and feed him until one or both of us fell asleep. I had already proven a miserable failure and no longer trusted my ability to nurture and protect my child. Leaving my son for several hours to go into the city, trusting that my husband would be able to care properly for him in my absence was scary because I’d recently learned that the Universe could be tricky and unpredictable. Or just plan mean.

Like everyone else at the memorial celebration, I sang a song for Andrew then spoke a few inadequate, awkward words. The song was, “Knee Deep in a River,” by Kathy Mattea—a fitting number about taking friends for granted until one day you realize they aren’t there anymore. I don’t remember what I said afterwards except that it ended with, “I just hope my son turns out to be half as cool as
Andrew.” Paying respects to Andrew’s family after the service, I asked his mom—an ex-bar patron from my piano bar days in New York – for pointers on how she’d managed to raise such an incredibly cool kid.

Andrew had been hanging out in the cabaret piano bars since he was a young boy, sipping colas and beating the tambourine whenever the singing servers (us) performed. He smacked, shook and did his own brand of rhythmic gymnastics with that tambourine until pretty soon we’d all forgotten how to sing without it. The nights he didn’t show up just felt wrong. I got to know him well when he was 16, sharing taxis or giving him rides home in my beat up Bronco on the nights his mom would get too sloshed and go home early, leaving him at the bar with his tambourine. He got kicked out of school for poor attendance when he was 17 and started playing piano for us after hours, when the club closed. We’d all stand around the baby grand with our sheet music, and he would take us through new songs, backing up our vocals with harmonies he’d come up with on the spot.

He was a snazzy dresser and wore Armani knock-off suits and ties. He chain-smoked and carried a Zippo lighter he’d whip out whenever someone reached for a cigarette or rolled a joint. He had impeccable manners and a sophisticated wit. He practiced Noel Coward droll and got really good at it. Nobody who didn’t already know could have suspected how young he was. He seemed like one of the adults. We respected him. We hung out with him.

When he was 18, he started subbing as the break pianist, playing for free at first, then for pay – $25 for a 15 minute set while the real pianist took a bathroom and food break. By the time he was 20, he was playing at other clubs in and around Restaurant Row, and we’d lost him to higher pay. Still, he’d come in after he’d played wherever and bang the tambourine, sing back up on the bar mike, and drink Jack and Cokes until closing time. None of us would serve him, since he was underage, but since his mom was a fixture at our bar and had no problem with his drinking, we didn’t stop him from discretely hopping over the bar and pouring himself a drink. When we’d finally get rid of the last protesting drunks in the room, pushing the airplane pilots, flight attendants and tourists out onto 46th Street with the usual,
“You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here,” he’d move to the baby grand and play our songs for us, just like the old days.

I loved the kid. He took me to see Bruce Springsteen at Madison Square Garden. He was the one to tell me when my 12 year on again/off again boyfriend was, once again, screwing around on me with the bimbo he’d eventually marry. Apparently, everyone had known for months, but Andrew was the one who had the guts to tell me the truth and break my heart for my own good. Two years later, he attended my wedding in Chestnut Hill—rented a hotel room, drove from the city, stayed for the reception and assured me I was marrying the right person. I took it as a good sign.

About a week before he died, he called to tell me how happy he was. He was working as the youngest keyboardist to ever travel with the *Ringling Bros. Barnum and Bailey Circus*. He said his box car was right between the Asian contortionists and the elephants. *What could be better than that?* he laughed. Then he admitted to being lonely sometimes and to missing all of us—the cabaret crowd, sitting on the stoop in front of the club, sharing jokes, cigarettes, the last shift drink and a pink city sunrise. I told him me, too. He said he’d be in Philly soon and really wanted to come to our new house on the Jersey Shore and meet the baby. We made plans.

But when he got to Philly, he came down with a cold. His dad drove down from the city to come to the show that day. When it was over, he took Andrew to the pharmacy to get some cold medicine. He told him how proud he was of all that he’d accomplished, and he asked if Andrew would like to have dinner after the afternoon show. Andrew said he really wasn’t feeling up to it and just needed a nap. His dad kissed him and said he’d see him when the circus came to New York in a week.

When their keyboardist didn’t show up for the afternoon show, the conductor sent one of the clowns to Andrew’s boxcar. He was still in bed. He’d never woken up from his nap. Even though he’d had diabetes for years and knew the signs of insulin shock, his body had told him it was just the cold making him feel lousy. His body had lied.
I asked Andrew’s mom how she’d raised such a cool kid because I really wanted her to know how special her son had been to all of us at the club, and because I was about to raise my own son, winging it, having had little training in how to be a good parent. I asked because, in her grief, I wanted her to know that—in spite of being a drunk who left her kid in the bar—I admired whatever it was that she had done to produce such a fine, mature, funny, talented, kind, sophisticated, fun-loving, adventurous person.

Her answer seemed simple enough at the time.

“Never lie to your child,” she said. “No matter what’s going on, always be honest.”

Smart ass George from the bar overheard my question and suggested perhaps I should just give her my son to raise, but I ignored him and thanked her for her advice, which I repeated to myself like a mantra: *Never lie. Always be honest.*

John F. Kennedy said, in a commencement address he delivered at Yale University in 1962, “The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.” This is true of the family lie—the one that so many mothers (including me) are guilty of. As a mom, in fact, I am a habitual liar. Not just about *Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy*, etc. – but about important things. *Feelings. Fears. Dreams. Desires. Expectations.* I pretend things are okay when they’re not. I smile when I’m trembling with fear or rage. I take prescription pills to stifle the upset, calm the frayed nerves and stop myself from yelling when I need so, so, so badly to yell. *The truth shall set you free* is the thing I am most afraid of.
The night my step-mother called to tell me about my father’s suicide, my husband and I were entertaining an overnight guest—Richie, an old friend from the bar who had driven my husband to his mother’s house near Altoona to help him clean it out prior to its sale. My mother-in-law had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s shortly after we got married and had degenerated to the point that she had to be hospitalized. My husband and Richie salvaged some of his boyhood memories and a full-sized mattress and box springs for our home. They had finished unloading the truck and were having a couple of beers, watching television and laughing about the old days.

My step-mother asked if I was sitting down. I knew the rest before she told me. I felt my heartbeat in my ears. I swooned. I took a few deep breaths to calm myself down for the son still inside of me then I calmly asked her if she was all right. I don’t remember the rest of the conversation, just that I didn’t cry. I used the Lamaze exercise I had learned in preparation for natural childbirth and took deep, slow breaths. I waited until my heart rate slowed down, then I launched my massive belly and the rest of me (I had gained 75 pounds) off of the bed, gripped the railing of our narrow staircase and was halfway down the steps before the scream came out, and I collapsed on the stairs with the words, “My dad shot himself in the head.”

My husband helped me back into bed, asked if I needed anything then went back downstairs to hang with Richie for the rest of the night. I could hear them talking and periodically laughing, just as if nothing had happened. After weeping for a few minutes, I decided my tears might not be good for the baby, and I used the Lamaze breathing exercises to calm myself. A part of me started hating my husband that night. Maybe because I could not bring myself to hate my father for what he had done.

Six weeks after my son was born, I was speaking on the telephone with my friend Laura, whose daughter was 6 months old, which made her an expert on child-rearing, in my opinion. I told her I was worried because my son had not smiled yet.
“Do you smile at him?” she asked?

I realized, with horror, that I had rocked him, fed him, changed him, dressed him, soothed him, cried with him, worried over him, but no—I had never smiled at him.

“Well, you might try that,” she laughed.

After that conversation, I plastered a big, fake smile on my face every time I looked at him. Pretty soon, he was mirroring it right back to me. To this day.

*Always be honest,* she had said.

My family lives in a large, crumbling farmhouse that we haven’t made a payment on in six years, since going through bankruptcy. My husband lost his book publishing job four years ago and now does temp work. We sleep in separate rooms. We refer to each other as “Mommy” and “Daddy” in front of the kids, as if those are our names, and we present ourselves to the world as a “normal” married couple with a big house in an affluent community. Most of the time, we don’t even think about the fact that we’re not *normal*. The elephant in the room is furniture, at this point. We would only notice him if he wasn’t there when we tried to sit down. That would be a shock. We’d fall. We have lived in the lie so long it has developed a sort of what fake news show host Stephen Colbert refers to as “*truthiness.*”

Like the tamed fox and his little prince, we sit at opposite corners of the wheat field, waiting.

On the subject of motherhood, author Jodi Picoult writes, in *House Rules*, “We're always bluffing, pretending we know best, when most of the time we're just praying we won't screw up too badly.” George Carlin echoes this anxiety in *Brain Droppings*, saying, “If your kid needs a role model and you ain't it,
you're both fucked.” Both of these statements are true about raising children and—in my case, at least—it’s the only reason I pretend to be a grown-up. I mean, honestly. Think of how much more fun it would be to just swing from the chandeliers with the kids.

I gripe and yell that they stay up too late or that their homework isn’t done because I figure that’s my job, but truth be told, if I wouldn’t be arrested for it, I’d just assume throw the kids into the car and take them to a cabaret or karaoke bar to sing and knock a few back. Or stay up late on a school night and play card games, eat popcorn, and listen to the soundtrack of a favorite musical. I hate having to be the responsible one. I miss being fun.

I set expectations for my children that I could never achieve. I tell my son not to drink so much soda and not to eat too much sugar, but I down about four liters of Diet Coke a day and would eat a pound of M&Ms if they were in the house. I fuss at him for cursing, but when I’m not around the kids, I curse like a sailor. I tell my daughter to make up her bed before school, but my bed stays unmade for weeks sometimes because there are just more important things to do in life. How can I expect them to be what I am not—what I never was capable of being? How can I expect them to care about things I never cared about? What right do I have to ask them to have their shit together if I never did? This may be the worst sort of lie because it implies that I believe there is an inherent importance in these habits they are so resistant to master. As though I am more capable, and their inabilities to rise to these manufactured standards are failures.

Hell. I smoke in the attic. My husband has dropped his pretense altogether and smokes in front of the kids now—always outside, never in the house, but within sight of them. He rolls his own cigarettes and leaves tobacco on the porch steps and the back patio. I grumble about this—his “filthy” habit—within earshot of the kids, the implication being that the “filthy” habit I’m grumbling about is cigarette smoking, when it’s actually the tobacco mess that pisses me off. My son, a teen, knows I smoke (though I never smoke in front of him), but he never mentions it. I’m pretty sure my daughter still doesn’t know. Or
maybe she does, and she has just decided to let me hide it from her because she realizes it’s something to be embarrassed about. It’s a lie we share.

My daughter is nine and—except for the occasional sleepover at Nana’s house—had never spent a night away from home until she was diagnosed with and hospitalized for two weeks for bipolar disorder this fall. I think I must have known for years but was willing to just call it “ADHD” until she was sent home from school after her first day of 4th Grade and asked not to return without a note from her doctor saying she was “stable.” This blindness on my part—let’s call it another lie of omission—cost her dearly and forced us all to face painful truths about ourselves we’d been denying.

Just like lies, one truth often leads to another.

This was the first year my daughter did not write a letter to Santa. Instead, she wrote it to me and left it lying on the steps to my office. We did not sprinkle reindeer “food” (glitter and granola) on the lawn this year, didn’t leave out cookies and milk. We omitted Santa completely, without conversation. Poof. He no longer existed. I signed the packages, “Love, Mommy and Daddy,” even though my husband has never done the Christmas shopping and had no clue what was in each box—a truth no kid needs to know. The last tooth that came out (via the dentist, as it was a rotten baby tooth that threatened to infect her gum) did not go under my daughter’s pillow. She handed it to me in a plastic bag and asked if I thought it was “worth anything.”

Never lie to your kids. Always be honest.

My kids have never seen me drunk, have never had to pull me out of a bar and roll me into a taxi in the middle of the night the way Andrew did with his mother. Aside from the rare anniversary outing, my husband and I have not even been to a bar in 14 years. If I drink, which is rare these days, it’s after they’ve gone to bed, and I drink wine until I pass out. They will never see this. Mostly, though, I’m immune to the angst that would put me there. The medication keeps me from flipping too far in either
direction. It allows me to not feel the way I really feel; to feel the way I really don’t. Or not to feel at all, even when my face smiles or frowns, and my eyes crinkle or drip with tears, or my arms embrace, or my voice rises, or my words say, “I feel ____.”

It’s a lie.

What I should say, were I capable of telling the truth without emotionally maiming my brood is, “I think I should be feeling _____, but I only think it because I can no longer feel.”

I do remember the sensation of swelling warmth around the muscles of the heart, the tingling of expectation, euphoria of joy or well of pride. I remember the lump in my throat, fighting back tears when my feelings were hurt or one of my children was teased at school and came to me for comfort. I remember the manic, lightning bolt of unbridled anger or indignation, the sink of loneliness, even the electrical current and pang of love and passion—all of that. I remember feeling all of those things once, not just thinking them.

I have a friend whose mother was in a terrible car accident when she was a newlywed and pregnant with him. She was in a coma, and they thought she would die, but she recovered. The thing is she could only remember her life a few years before the accident. So she didn’t know who her husband was, and she didn’t remember being pregnant. My friend’s grandfather took the couple into his home while she was recovering. Her husband had to keep reminding her that she loved him and had married him. She thought he was very nice but did not feel any particular affection for this handsome stranger—only gratitude that he and his father were taking care of her as she grew larger with the child she didn’t remember conceiving. She refused to sleep in the same room with her husband. In her mind, she was still a teenager, and the whole pregnancy thing was crazy. She was a virgin.
She had the baby (my friend) and cared for him minimally when reminded to do so, but she was incapable of loving him, her husband, or the old man caring for her. She looked beautiful and acted like her teenage self, but she never grew past 16. She got older but never matured.

She eventually healed and realized she could no longer live as someone else’s version of the truth, no matter how nice they had been to her or how grateful she was for their care. She divorced my friends’ father and soon after married someone else then moved across the country. My friend went back and forth between the two states and households, being raised alternately by his forever teenage mother and step-father (whom he hated, of course), and his beloved, perpetually grieving father and grandfather.

He’s married now and has two kids of his own. His family alternates, spending holidays with their Pennsylvania relatives or their “Granny” in Tucson or “Pappy” in Texas. One Thanksgiving Day a few years ago, his mother took him aside after dinner and said to him, “You know, you’re so nice, and your kids are really cute. I wish I could feel the love I’m supposed to feel for you as a mother, but I just don’t. I know I’m supposed to feel it, but I can’t. I wish I could.”

To these killing words, my friend replied, “That’s okay, Momma, I love you enough for both of us.”

I cried when he told me this. I said, “How could she say that to you?” And he said, “No. It’s okay. It made me love her more. She is who she is, and she gives what she can give. The fact that she’s acted as my mother all these years without having had the benefit of feeling love for me means that she gave me everything she could give me. That was a very loving thing for her to do.”

*Never lie to your kids. Always be honest.*
My sister-in-law in Chestnut Hill used to say this thing to her young daughters, when they would interrupt us “grownups” as we were sipping wine and chatting at one of the backyard barbeques she used to host, years ago. She’d laugh and say, “Go play in traffic, will you?”

I was horrified.

The other thing she used to say that I was sure would scar her girls for life was, “Because she’s my favorite daughter,” whenever one of the two would ask why the other got to do such and such and they didn’t. She was being funny, flippant, but I cringed inside.

Now the girls are grown. They’re both beautiful and successful at what they do, and they’re very close to their mom, in spite of having been told repeatedly to “go play in traffic.”

My mother used to tell me she was going to give me back to the Indians when she was annoyed with me. For a long time, I sort of believed her. My mom frequently returned things – clothing she’d bought and changed her mind about, shoes, husbands. I had no doubt I was equally disposable, should the mood hit her. The unlikelihood of having been dropped in a bundle on her doorstep in 1962 in Galena Park by a traveling tribe didn’t really occur to me until I was old enough to reason things through and realize my mom, who looked just like an older version of me, had come by me the old-fashioned way.

This truth caused me much more anxiety, and I tried very hard *not* to think about it.

In his book *The Sun Watches the Sun*, Dejan Stojanovic, the Serbian poet and philosopher, wrote, “A smiling lie is a whirlwind, easy to enter, but hard to escape.” In the context of friends and family, I suppose this sentiment is analogous to Stephen King’s idea of the “web of duty,” with a smile.

There are times when I want to grab my guitar and some notebooks, pens, and my laptop, hop in the ancient Winnebago, turn the key, and just take off for a few months, maybe travel back to Nashville to check on an old boyfriend. then head down to Florida to swim with the dolphins. After that, I could go
see my sister and her kids in Texas, then mosey along to L.A. to hang with my old NYC roomie, who’s still single and posts Facebook photos of herself dressed in poodle skirts, doing the jitterbug with strangers—selfies that make it look like she’s always having more fun than I will ever have again. I’d drive up the coast and visit my brother in Portland then cut straight across the heartland—perhaps chase a few tornados. I don’t know.

Even writing about it makes me feel unbearably lonely and tired. That’s a lot of driving, and what golden childhood moments would I miss while I was gone?

Still, as I grin at my children like a hungry Cheshire cat, I have the fantasy.

I think about these things when I’m packing lunches and snacks and frying eggs, pouring cereal, yelling up the stairs for the kids to come down before they miss their bus again. Then they come downstairs in a frenzy, and I tell them to have a great day and that I love them. I zip their coats and chase them out the door with gloves they will not wear, even when it’s 12 degrees outside. I shove the gloves into their pockets as they run to catch the bus at the bottom of the icy driveway. Then I stand on the front porch and wave as the bus pulls away. My shoulders drop.

I sigh, *Thank God*.

Truth be damned. My kids can never know this.
Dysfunctional Dining

Our family has eaten dinner in front of the television set for the past three years. Strangely, we are all comforted by that, and to propose that we do otherwise would cause a major upheaval in our house. Aside from the 45 minutes to an hour or so that we spend together watching a show and eating, each of the four of us pretty much revolve in our own little universe, behind closed doors.

My 10 year-old daughter is working her way through the entire Harry Potter series and is addicted to educational computer games, Disney preteen sitcoms where everybody is sarcastic and rude to each other, and collecting Pokemon on her DS 3D XL. My 13 year-old son received a space-ship-like computer for his birthday last year (not from us— from a way-too-generous family friend), and we have hardly seen him since. My husband spends his days and nights doing temp work from his computer in what used to be the formal living room/music room but has now become his office. I spend most of my life on the third floor, in my attic office, writing, reading or playing with my mini-recording studio. Okay, I smoke up here, too. Shut up.

My husband and I take turns cooking dinner (lately, my daughter has been helping out in the cooking department, having received several kids’ cookbooks for her birthday). When dinner is almost ready, we scream upstairs for the family to come down, and we set placemats on the coffee table and two TV trays placed in front of the easy chairs bookending the sofa. We scream a few more times until everyone is finally in one place, then we serve the food and commence to argue about what to watch. Sometimes, this argument lasts until we have all finished eating, and
we clear the plates and send the kids back upstairs to wash, brush their teeth, or finish their homework.

We frequently binge-watch an entire series over a month or two. I was introduced to and followed the saga of the various Dr. Who’s throughout the entirety of last year before we moved on to Sherlock. When we watch movies, it often takes us a week or so to get through them, bite by bite. On the weekends, we will watch a film straight through, but during the week, we’re bound by school schedules and bedtime routines, so continuity is compromised.

Speaking during a program is discouraged, but my kids and husband are incapable of not speaking for more than a few minutes at a time, so we always have the mute button close at hand, so as not to miss any dialogue. Sometimes we have to rewind and watch a scene several times because of random interruptions by one or more of the four of us. When this happens, we scowl at one another and sigh loudly. Dinner conversation is limited to what we can fit in during commercials or pauses.

I am aware that this sounds sad and dysfunctional. But it is what comforts us.

There was a time when we indulged in sit-down meals at the table, like The Waltons. When the kids were little, we’d snap them into their booster chairs, cut their food, dab the sides of each little messy mouth with a napkin and giggle over the cute things they did and said. They loved our company then and had fun teasing and playing with each other. I felt a swell of pride every time I put steaming platters of freshly cooked vegetables and meatloaf or home-cooked gumbo on the table in front of my family. This was me being a mom—a real mom. It was a role I embraced with the pleasure of a child playing dress up. My mother had never cooked (she wasn’t allowed—it was the 60’s). Sit-down meals were TV dinners in foil packages with peel-back tops.
TV trays were metal things that pinched your fingers when you put them in the corner. None of that nonsense for my family. Look how far I’ve come, I’d think, on my own, without anyone showing me how. My family is sitting at a table eating food I cooked for them.

We have a formal dining room with a massive Oak, claw-footed table which we pile with mail, backpacks, books, packages, and other debris. Twice a year—at Thanksgiving, and on Christmas Day eve, we scrape the table’s contents into cardboard boxes, clean the oak with a sponge and a dry rag, then adorn it with one of two thrift-shop lace tablecloths, a centerpiece candle, and mostly matching, shiny flatware. We dig out the mismatched gravy boats, salt and pepper shakers, and as many unchipped China plates as we can find in our kitchen cabinets, and we sit down over a turkey or ham dinner, like civilized people. The kids hate this and are antsy and uncomfortable with no safe place to put their elbows and nothing civil to say to one another.

We have a long pine farm table in the kitchen, and this is where we eat together on the rare occasions the cable is out or we have a sleepover guest. The kids eat breakfast at this table when they make it down in time and aren’t about to miss the bus. On weekends, this is where we eat soup or drink hot chocolate with marshmallows after coming inside and kicking off our snow boots.

The rest of the time, the table is empty.
I am, by any accounts, a reasonably rational woman at this stage in my life. I’m 53 years old, married, the mother of two children and several pets. I have an unglamorous freelance writing and editing career. I know what’s important in life, and I don’t usually resent or regret my choices. My feet are on the ground. Now. This was not always the case.

When I was 3 years old, my parents took me to see the premiere of a new movie musical of a popular Broadway stage production. My mother says that although the film was over three hours long with an intermission, I sat on the edge of my seat and didn’t blink once throughout the entirety of The Sound of Music. When the movie was over, I turned to her and said, “I want to write Maria a letter to tell her how much I love her.”

I remember this and my mother’s answer, “Well, if you’re going to write her a letter, you should use her real name – Julie. Maria is only her pretend name. She’s an actress named Julie Andrews. Her job is to pretend to be other people in the movies.” I can blame this moment on the next 30 years of my life.
This was the first moment I knew what I would do when I grew up and the
beginning of a lifelong fanaticism. I became obsessed with *The Sound of Music*, Julie Andrews,
and musicals. Before the days of VCRs or digital technology that would allow one to rent or
purchase a film and watch it at home, I saw *The Sound of Music* 48 times in the theater and on
its yearly television airing. My first record was *The Sound of Music*, and I played it again and
again on my little portable plastic record player in my room, leaving the player’s arm to the side
after the LP dropped into place on the spinning disc so that the needle would finish Side 1 and
return to its beginning again – and again, and again. I sat holding the album cover in my little
twin bed, rested my head against my pink wicker headboard, and stared at the angry face of
Captain Von Trapp as he stood, arms akimbo, scowling at a jubilant Maria and his seven children
as they skipped across the alps dressed in play clothes made out of curtains. I was in love.

My mother said Christopher Plummer was too stiff and mean as the Captain. She didn’t
see what Maria could have possibly seen in him. But to me, that was what made the movie so
incredibly romantic—that falling in love with Maria changed him, softened his demeanor. I was
in love—not with Christopher Plummer or the Captain, not with Maria, but with their love for
each other. I was in love with love. (Hollywood style, of course.)

I wanted to be Gretel. I would scoot up our steps one at a time on my bottom, singing,
“The sun has gone/to bed and so must I.” I wanted to be Liesel in her beautiful chiffon dress,
being twirled around the gazebo by Rolf. I wanted to be Maria, with a guitar in one hand and a
carpet bag in the other, singing about confidence. Or dancing the Landler on the terrace then
kissing the captain in the shadows of the gazebo. Even as a small child, that scene excited every
cell in my body – not in a sexual way, but like an awakening. I was alive from the top of my
head to my toes – blushing along with Maria, squeezing my popcorn box while suppressing an inner squeal. My heart felt like a balloon that would burst or carry me into the heavens.

I tolerated the scenes with Max and Elsa, the Mother Abbes, the Nazis, the Salzberg Festival after the Trapps left the stage. Those scenes had nothing to say to me as a child, though I’ve come to appreciate them since. I waited them out like commercials, and my pulse would slow as I relaxed my grip on my soda and popcorn. Then Julie and Chris would be back on screen, and my endorphins would kick into overdrive again. I was like a crack addict. At an early age, my brain began forming neuropathways of romance reward.

By the time my brain was “set,” structurally, in my mid-twenties, I was neurologically programmed for failure, romantically-speaking. I mean, who in the real world could ever possibly come close to my ideal? Who could provide that same on-again, off-again “fix” of romantic adrenaline I’d come to expect? Who could be Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer, the Captain and Maria, music and adventure, conflict and resolution, plus seven adorable children and the Alps, all rolled into one? I was willing to climb every mountain and ford every stream to find out.

I wasn’t alone in my obsession. According to Worldwide Data, the musical has grossed $286,214,286 since its 1965 release. That’s just at the box office. As of 2014, it had also brought in another $27,603,940 in video/DVD sales. It is the most popular musical in the world and the third highest grossing film of all-time (behind Star Wars and Gone with the Wind). It is the only American musical allowed in North Korea, and there have been stage productions of it everywhere and in every language. When the musical opened in South Korea, it was so popular that the owner of the theater decided to cut all the musical numbers in order to shorten the film and add several more showings a day. The crowds still came.
As a kid, my cousin and step-sister were equally fanatic about the movie. Whenever Julie Andrews was on television, we’d kiss her picture in the TV Guide until the ink smeared. For the yearly theatrical re-release, our parents would drop us off at the theater for the first showing and pick us up after the last show. (It was a very different time then, obviously). We dressed up like the Von Trapp kids to see the movie and sang along with every song – decades before the concept of the sing-along was a thing.

In case you’ve been living in a cave for the past 20 years or so, *The Sound of Music* singalong edition is a cult phenomenon worldwide. The actual Von Trapp grandchildren and the grown kid-actors from the film attend every year at the Hollywood Bowl, where people dress up as brown paper packages tied up with strings and “Ray—a drop of golden sun.” I read about one little girl who wore a goat costume and carried three brown balloons. (She was the lonely goat turd.) My mother has a friend in her 60s who dresses up like a nun to attend the New Jersey singalongs.

She is otherwise quite normal.

There’s a video of the Hollywood Bowl event on YouTube. The sold-out crowd of 70,000 or so hisses the Baroness’ lines and screams their approval when the Captain tells Maria the engagement is off. When he kisses her, they cheer and ignite actual fireworks. I’m not making this up. People everywhere are bat-shit crazy when it comes to this movie. It’s not just me.

Asked about the film’s unique and lasting effect upon the public, Julie Andrews has attributed the film’s longevity to its rare family appeal and the fact that it has a new generation of
fans every 7 years or so. “It has a quality of joy about it,” she said, in a recent interview about the film’s 50th Anniversary. “It is an adventure. It’s a love story. You have beautiful music and wonderful mountains. I guess it’s got a lot going for it, and because it is a family movie, it has lasted.”

I think the movie’s appeal is the love story—between Maria and the Captain, yes, but mostly between Maria and the children. The first scene the cast filmed together was the one in Maria’s bedroom at the Von Trapp mansion her first night in the home. During a raging thunderstorm, the children run into their new governess’ room. She could have sent them back to bed, but instead, she invites them to “hop in” with her, and they snuggle up to her under the silk goose down comforter as she sings to them about her “favorite things.” When the Captain marches in to break up the fun, asking Maria if she has a problem remembering that “bed times are to be strictly observed” in the household, she looks her uptight employer in the eye and says, “Only during thunderstorms.” With these words, Maria/Julie became the guardian angel and patron saint of children everywhere. The confusing but somehow perfect fact that her Oscarwinning screen alter-ego was Mary Poppins sealed the deal in our hearts. Julie/Mary/Maria Was the mother of us all—not the busy or absent or often cross real one, she was the fantasy Mother who loved us unconditionally and cared most of all about our welfare.

My Maria/Mary obsession broadened a bit in my early childhood to include Juliet Mills as “Nanny,” from the popular 60s TV show Nanny and the Professor. Hope Lang’s character of a widowed mother of two children (and an adorable dog) in television’s The Ghost and Mrs. Muir was another early obsession, along with the small screen’s first African-American heroine mom, Julia, starring Diahann Carroll as the widowed mother raising her young son on her own. In The Flying Nun, Sally Field dedicated her life and her unique talents (Don’t ask. - Well, okay.
Her wide nun cornet headpiece helps her fly – Told you not to ask.) to keeping an impoverished orphanage afloat. In The Courtship of Eddie’s Father, a Japanese nanny/housekeeper filled the role of surrogate mother/wife to a small boy and his widowed father, whom she addressed as “Mr. Eddie’s Father.” A child of divorce, my dreams were filled with mix-n-match episodes of these shows and my favorite films, and I would wake up wishing for my own personal nanny to come live with me and make everything okay.

When I was 10, my mother remarried and, for the first time in my life, became a “stay-at-home” mom, even becoming my Girl Scout troupe leader. The house we moved into was a stately Memorial chateau-style mini-mansion (something between a mansion and what we today call a “McMansion.”) with 21 rooms and a kidney-shaped pool with a running rock waterfall in the acre-plus backyard. Included in the marriage deal were step-siblings – a three year-old boy and a girl four years my junior – who lived with us off and on, depending on their mother’s mental state and habitual alcohol-imbibing tendencies. I tolerated my new step-brother and embraced my step-sister like my separated-at-birth, long-lost twin. The step-father, oddly, transformed over the 6 year marriage, from a friendly, if slightly sarcastic oil tycoon, to a cynical, hardnosed version of Captain Von Trapp before being softened by Maria’s love. In short, he was a prick. On days when my step-siblings weren’t staying with us (which was often), I climbed the tall, winding staircase in the marble entry hall, padded down the long, blue Carpeted hallway and locked myself in my room to listen to cast albums.

When I was 12, my mother and step-father took a cruise on the QE II. Their table companions included a couple from England who were good friends with Julie Andrews and her husband, Blake Edwards. My mother told them how obsessed I was with Julie, and they suggested I write to her to let her know. They gave my mother her actual address at the time: 56
Chester Square, London, England, I believe it was. I trembled with apprehension holding the scrawled Bevnap link to my heroine. It took me a week or more to compose the letter, and I labored over every word, not wanting to sound too much like a typical “fan,” but wanting to convey my adoration and respect for her talents and let her know what an inspiration she had been in my life.

I told her that I was planning to go into show business, too. That I’d known what I wanted to be since I had seen her in The Sound of Music when I was three. I included several photos of me and my family and think I said something schmaltzy and embarrassing like, “I always wished you could come live here and take care of me.”

I wasn’t the only kid in the world with this fantasy. In a recent interview celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the film, a fawning Diane Sawyer told Julie that everyone dreamed of her being their mom. Julie’s answer was something like, “Oh, dear. Really? No! They would have been terribly disappointed, I’m afraid. ‘Mum’ was a very busy lady.”

Apparently, as we were all dreaming of being noticed and taken care of by Julie, her children were sharing the same wish.

Of course, it wasn’t really Julie we all wanted to mother us—it was Maria, or Mary Poppins, both of whom were “practically perfect in every way.” Making the two films – her first, save for the adults-only The Americanization of Emily, which none of us were able to see until we were much older–had forever linked her in our young imaginations with wholesome nurturing and discipline served with magic and a “spoon full of sugar” to help the “medicine go down.” The virginal mother Maria/Mary would swoop in and save the day, bringing love,
harmony and restoring the balance between the children and their preoccupied parents. Once her mission was accomplished, and the children and their parents loved one another properly again, she disappeared. In Mary Poppins, she simply floated away on her umbrella with a vague promise to return someday “when the wind changes.” The kids were so happy being noticed by their parents again, they didn’t even realize she had gone.

In *The Sound of Music*, Maria was absorbed into the family, replacing her role of governess with that of mother to the Captain’s seven children. The transition was seamless (save for those pesky Nazis who threatened to ruin everything just when life was getting good), and when the Von Trapps were forced to abandon their palatial home and Austrian wealth to hike on foot over the Alps and escape to America to start their lives from scratch (In truth, they took a train over the border to Italy – Switzerland, it turns out, was not across those Obersaltzberg mountain range. Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest was.), we knew they’d be okay because they had faith in Maria, and Maria, the almost-nun, had an inside tract to God and “confidence in confidence alone.”

Imagine my surprise when, months after I sent that fan letter, Julie Andrews wrote back to me, via her secretary. I still have the letter thanking me for my letter and returning my photos, “…since most of them cannot ever be replaced.” She wished me the best in my future career and suggested I get appropriate training, as finding a job in the theatre was difficult, with a lot of competition. I still have the autographed black and white matte photo and the typed letter on Julie Andrews letterhead, signed “Claire Priest,” Julie’s personal secretary.

The letter came just about the time I was transitioning into teen-hood, and my allegiances
were shifting. Though Julie Andrews would always be my “first favorite,” she was the stuff of
my childhood and, as such, had to be at least temporarily discarded, along with my Smokey Bear
and Winnie the Pooh stuffies, which were relegated from the pillow, to the window sill. (I still
have both of them, sitting on the bookshelf in my bedroom.)

My new “favorite” was Barbra Streisand, and I spent the entirety of my weekly
allowance at the record store every weekend, purchasing every one of her albums and any Rona
Barret’s Hollywood that had her photo. I saw *Funny Girl* and *Funny Lady* in the theater with my
mom and step-sister, and I replayed the albums until the grooves were worn.

I desperately wished to look more like Barbra, rather than the boring Natalie Wood, with
whom I was physically compared on a daily basis—so much so that I eventually ended up
identifying as a second-rate, not-quite right version of the film beauty. I wanted blue eyes instead
of my smoky browns. I wanted an exotic bump on my upturned nose, and I began sleeping with a
clothespin on the bridge of my nose. I did. I began speaking in rapid-fire Brooklynese, confusing
my Texas classmates, who were used to me speaking with my version of Julie’s British accent. It
wasn’t enough to worship my idol—I needed desperately to become her.

My best friend Karen resembled Barbra (Yes, I spelled it right. She removed the “a”
when an agent told her she needed to change her name.) in her *What’s Up Doc* days, with long,
ironed dirty blonde hair and piercing blue almond-shaped eyes. Like me, Karen was a Streisand
fanatic. We took acting classes together and dreamed of future stardom. Because she was one
year older, Karen had her driver’s license and access to her sister’s car. Together, we saw the
Streisand/Kristofferson *A Star is Born* 16 times in the theater during its initial release. We knew
every line and greatly annoyed the other viewers by whispering each line a split second before
the actors spoke.
We sang every song on the cast album during our weekly sleepovers and even, with a bit of sleuth work on my part, found out Barbra’s mother, Diane Kind’s phone number and called her on a regular basis to chat about our devotion to her daughter. Whether she was unusually tolerant, lonely, or just indulgent to her daughter’s fans, I don’t know, but the lovely lady never admonished us for bothering her at home but instead answered our questions: What is Barbra’s favorite color? Yellow. Should we go to New York or Hollywood to pursue our own careers?

*Stay in school, darlings. Get a good education. The whole show biz thing is a phase.*
*You’ll outgrow it.*

When Barbra’s sister, singer Roslyn Kind, appeared on Saturday Night Live with her former brother-in-law, Barbra’s ex-husband, Elliot Gould, we called Diane to tell her how talented both her daughters were. In return, she sent us personally-autographed 8 by 10 glossies of “Rozzie.”

The summer I turned 15, Karen’s father invested in a film production company, and her family moved to L.A. I thought I would die without my friend and Babs co-conspirator. We promised to write each other every day and call once a week. That summer, I flew to L.A. to spend a week with Karen and her family in their new Hollywood Hills home. We swam in the backyard pool overlooking the canyon, and we drove to Barbra’s Beverly Hills mansion at 301 North Carolwood Drive and raided her garbage can. (Yes, I’m ashamed – now. At the time, it was the closest I would ever get to my idol, and I was thrilled at the intimate access.) I collected scribbled notes reminding someone (her?) to “Call Sidney (Lumet? Sheldon?) to return script,” and “Remind Jon (Peters!) to buy Jason (Gould-her son!) a bathing suit.” I found a Tab can (that
her lips had touched?!) a half-eaten (by her mouth!) cinnamon roll and folded napkin from Butterfly Bakery (owned by her sister, Rozzie!), and a partial signature on the bottom of a ripped letter.

I treasured these items like religious icons and saved them for years. I think I may still have a few crumbs from that cinnamon roll in a bag somewhere, as a matter of fact. I don’t recall ever throwing it away, anyhow. (Note to self: Clean out old steamer trunk with childhood memorabilia.)

One day, Karen, her friend Shannon (also a Streisand fanatic), and Karen’s sister Janice and I drove to Malibu in search of Barbra’s beach home. We followed the newspaper boy on his tiny blue Honda Motorbike along his route, threading our way through a labyrinth of narrow, flowery streets that led us down a dreamy rabbit hole until we finally arrived at the end of a culde-sac where a mammoth black iron floral gate shielded our idol from determined curiosity seekers like us.

“This is it,” promised the newspaper boy – a teenager we’d flirted with until he agreed to show us the way to our idol’s residence. He tossed a paper over the fence and took off, leaving us there to wonder, “What next?”

For me, it was enough to see the gate featured in a photo montage with Sadie and her other dogs on the back of Barbra’s Songbird album. But Karen, never one to give a shit about propriety, needed to pee, so she hopped out of the backseat and marched over the small hill to the left of the gate, leaving the rest of us sitting with the car, praying that she wouldn’t get caught peeing in Barbra’s yard and humiliate the rest of us with her gross (and illegal) disrespect.
A few seconds later, she came running over the hill, laughing.

“Shit!” She snorted, hopping into the back seat.

“Holy shit! Someone saw me, and they’re coming.”

Janice, who had been sitting on the hood, her head in her hands, as her sister trespassed to relieve herself, jumped back in the driver’s seat and started the engine just as two preteen boys walked around the gate from the driveway, followed by a medium-sized German shepherd mix I recognized as “Bullet,” from the *Songbird* back cover.

“Oh. My. God,” I said, interrupting Karen, who was rambling on about the two beautiful houses she could see from her perch on the hillside. “Karen! Look.”

Karen recognized the boys, too. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die, but Karen hopped out of the car to flirt with Jason Gould and Christopher Peters – son of Jon Peter’s, Barbra’s live in boyfriend and producer of *A Star is Born*, as well as Leslie Ann Warren’s ex-husband and former hairdresser to the stars. I was mortified and suddenly ashamed of our intrusive fanaticism. I had nothing – NOTHING to say to these boys, whose home we were invading, whose dog we were petting. Shy, I hid behind my instamatic camera and took snapshots of Karen with the dog and half-shots of the boys, who darted out of the frame when they realized they were being photographed. Then they took off around the gate with Bullet, and I grabbed Karen’s arm and pulled her into the back seat, yelling to Janice to “Floor it!” before the boys got back to their house and the police were called.

We had followed the newspaper boy to the house and had no idea how to get back to the main road, so we wound our way through the neighborhood for what felt like an hour, terrified at
every turn that the cops would be after us for trespassing and pee ing in Barbra’s yard, photographing her son and dog without her permission. We were euphoric and filled with the thrill of danger and our own daring, screaming about the audacity of what we had done and how nobody would ever believe it when they heard, and “Oh, my God! We actually talked to Jason and pet Bullet!”

I still have those photographs. I have no idea if we were really at Barbra’s house or if the gate was the same one on the back of Songbird or if the boys were really Jason and Christopher or the dog was really Bullet. But I believed it then, and it was the most excitement I had ever experienced in my life at that point. I left L.A. still missing my friend Karen, but happy that her move had provided me with the opportunity to have such an amazing adventure.

A few weeks after the visit, Karen, perhaps emboldened by our experience, drove herself to Diane Kind’s apartment building and rang her buzzer. When she identified herself to our old telephone pal as “Karen – the girl from Texas who used to call you every week,” Ms. Kind told her she was not invited to come to her home, and she needed to go away, or she would have to phone the police. Karen told her she was sorry and wouldn’t bother her again. We never did.

Like my obsession with The Sound of Music, I had plenty of company idolizing Barbra Streisand. She is one of the few performers to have the distinction of having won every single industry prize, including: the Oscar (twice), Grammy (8 times), Emmy (5 awards), American Film Institute award, Kennedy Center Honors prize, 11 Golden Globe awards, and a Peabody award. From the first time she opened her mouth to sing in public at a talent contest at The Lion, a gay bar in New York’s West Village (she won), she has been worshipped for her enormous talent.
But it was more than talent that propelled her into the “star” stratosphere and made her a cultural icon and my teen idol. It was her story. Born in 1942, the awkward Brooklyn girl with the big nose lost her father when she was a baby. Her mother remarried, but Barbra couldn’t stand her step-father, a Real Estate salesman she referred to as a “used car salesman or something.” Shortly after her half-sister was born, Barbra moved into Manhattan to become an actress, but her odd looks and nasal Brooklyn accent kept her from being accepted into The Actor’s Studio when she auditioned, and she faced similar rejection wherever she went. The talent contest at The Lion offered free dinners and a one week singing gig as its prize. Before that week was out, there were lines around the corner to hear “the kooky kid from Brooklyn” with the amazing voice. Within a year, she was headlining on the Jack Paar Show and co-starring with her soon-to-be husband, Elliot Gould, in a hit Broadway musical, *I Can Get it for you Wholesale*. *Funny Girl*, and a Tony Award, followed, and before the end of the run, she was off to Hollywood to film her Oscar-winning debut as Fanny Brice. Her albums sat at the top of every chart for years. CBS offered her a five-year television contract to star in yearly variety episodes.

Everything she touched turned to gold. The unlucky, skinny, funny-looking kid from Brooklyn became the world’s “greatest star,” and all us step-father-hating, awkward, ugly-feeling girls wanted to be just like her.

Here are some of the lessons I learned from early Barbra Streisand films:

- If you believe hard enough that you are the world’s “greatest star,” you can make it happen— no matter what you look like.
➢ If you love the wrong man hard enough, you can get him to love you back – at least, for a while.
➢ If you care enough, you can create passion in your life, even if that passion leads you to romantic ruin.
➢ Broken men can be fixed by your love. Temporarily.

These were dangerous lessons—ones it would take me decades of heartache to unlearn. I learned something else from Barbra. How to sing. I emulated her in front of the mirror in my room, playing her albums again and again, singing along, breathing when she breathed, mimicking her dynamics, copying her pronunciation, clipping the ends of words with dramatic flair, spitting consonants, raising my arms and expanding them at my sides during long, loud notes, closing my eyes and acting the song as though it were a three-act play. My step-father hated hearing me sing and told my mother one day he’d finally figured out how to get me to stop – by removing the mirror from my room.

It would take years to find my own singing style, but those early years singing along with Barbra gave me a vocal foundation that put me on track for my future singing career. If my obsession with her was excessive to the extreme, it kept me out of trouble during the 70s and provided a safe haven from the turmoil of our rapidly eroding home life.

Most importantly, because she did it, I believed I could do it, too. Like Barbra, who left the land of “baseball, boredom, and bad breath,” for the Great White Way when she was only 18, I planned my escape to the big city and future fame and fortune. It didn’t matter that my skin was a mess, I was overweight, my step-father hated me, and I never went to a single high school prom. Barbra had shared a similar dissatisfaction with her
looks, hated her step-father and also had no boyfriends in school, and look at how she turned out.

As I grew into adulthood and gained confidence, my obsessions shifted. I went through a Rocky Horror Picture Show phase and danced the Time Warp underneath the screen at Houston’s Alabama Playhouse no less than 200 times, dressed in my spangled top hat and blue glitter tap shoes. I worked and fell head-over-heels in love with a violent, bisexual divorce’ pianist with three kids, then I met a charming alcoholic singer/actor from New Jersey and moved in with him. When that didn’t work out, I returned to the abusive pianist until the night he threatened to kill me, and I left with the clothes on my back and my puppy in my arms. I found my own place but was lured back into the abusive lair once more. When I left, I met and moved in with the first man I met, a pasty redhead who ran a questionable apartment rental business and went by two separate names. We shared a rented a house in the suburbs with two of his buddies from the office, and I frequently found myself in the position of having to give rides home to disheveled exotic dancers the boys had picked up the night before.

I was performing the lead in Gypsy at the time, and I had to sing a song to a little lamb on stage. Only the lamb grew into a sheep during the six week rehearsal period and pooped in my lap opening night. They put a diaper on him for the remainder of the run, and I grew quite fond of the smelly guy, so when they told me when the show closed that he would be headed to a rendering house and turned into chops, I insisted he was coming home with me. To make a long story short, he ate the garage, and we lost our deposit. When I moved to New York City, I dropped the sheep off at the petting zoo.

In New York, I waitressed, fell in love and became obsessed with the wrong people. Then my career became my obsession. Karen married a cinematographer and moved to Iowa.
She had two kids before she was 20, and we kept in touch through the years, but I was self-absorbed and not a very good friend during that time. She was unhappy, and I had no patience hearing about her kids (which just weren’t real to me) and her troubles, which were plenty.

By the time I married and had the first of my two children, Karen was raising her grandson because her unmarried, teenage single-mom daughter had been killed in an auto accident. She sent boxes of baby clothes for my son, and we compared notes as the boys progressed through their stages, six months apart. When my son was small, we visited Karen and her grandson in Houston. A lifelong smoker, she’d been diagnosed with a rare lung disease and had been given only a few months to live. We reminisced about our obsession with Barbra and our teenage dreams as we watched the two boys happily play together. A few months later, Karen overdosed on a combination of Nyquil and pain medication. Her husband found her slumped in a chair, in front of the television one morning, covered in vomit.

I can’t listen to Barbra Streisand anymore. It hurts. I’ll always be a fan, but at a distance. Whenever I’m sad, I pop a Rogers and Hammerstein musical into the DVD player. My kids have seen them all, but they are not really into the movies and mostly just humor me when I’m in one of my “moods.” (We’re halfway through The King and I at the moment.) I don’t think they’d ever seen the entire The Sound of Music until just prior to the film’s 50th Anniversary this year, when, fueled by all the media hype and TV interviews with cast members, I insisted on watching it together as a family, with the intermission, but all in one sitting. (We usually watch films half an hour at a time, and it takes us a week or more to get through them. My kids do not have the attention span I had at three.)

I was excited to hear my son admit that The Sound of Music really was “a very good
movie.” And my daughter said it was, “Great!” In all honesty, I was so worried about how they were enjoying the film that I forgot to enjoy it from more than anything but an aesthetic perspective myself during that sitting, so I sneaked downstairs after everyone had gone to bed and took the DVD out of the player and popped it into my computer to watch again – alone. By the time the Captain and Maria were kissing in the gazebo, I’d been transported back into my little girl soul, and my heart was beating “like the wings of the birds / that rise from the lake to the trees.”

I watched the film, then went on YouTube and watched videos about the making of the movie. I opened the book about the film my husband had given me last Christmas and read it, cover-to-cover. I watched the gazebo scene again, then slowed it down, frame-by-frame, and studied it. I felt giddy with the power to study the film in a way that never had been possible when I was a child. Also a little silly. But it’s a benign enough obsession, I suppose.

When the movie was released to selected theaters on its 50th Anniversary, I took my daughter to see it on the big screen, with an intermission (which turned out to be only 2 minutes long – not long enough!) She sat through the whole thing without squirming (mostly) or talking, a rare accomplishment for my normally fidgety, attentional-challenged 10 year-old. I had the sense that she was humoring me, but she claims to have enjoyed the experience of seeing it in a theater. (I tried to get my mom to go with me at the movie’s second showing in the week. Her reply, “Are you kidding me? Three and a half hours? No, thank you! I’ve already seen it.”) As I write this, I can already feel the glow wearing off. The mild euphoria wave I’d managed to catch over the past two months leading up to the film’s re-release has settled into an afterglow, and it’s time to put the DVD back in its box for a few more years. Still, I’m grateful to have been reminded of a time when there were plenty of rainbows to be followed and mountains
Because I’ve studied the film and the book by Maria Von Trapp that inspired it, I know that the story we’re told in The Sound of Music is a very romanticized version of the real events and that the real story happened after that imaginary Alp-crossing, when Maria, the Captain, and the children had to face the world with nothing and build an entire real (and later fabled) life from scratch. The older, wiser me appreciates this untold part of the story even more. This is the “dream that will need / all the love you can give / every day of your life / for as long as you live” that the Mother Abyss was singing about.

This is the real journey – the one called “Life.”
I am new to this apartment complex—our second since my mom and dad got divorced. I walk barefoot over the pebbled sidewalks where I will stub my big toe repeatedly over the next two summers. There are other children here, though the complex is mostly inhabited by singles and newly divorced airline workers or NASA scientists. In time, I will roam the grounds with a small pack of kids whose parents took a leap of faith or desperation into what would come to be known as the “me” generation. But on this day, I am new and in search of a person—any person—who will play with me.

The courtyard is arranged in rectangular fashion around a large, kidney-shaped pool. There are tables with chairs—places for the grown-ups to sit, talk and smoke while the kids frolic in the shallow end during stifling Texas summer afternoons. For now, though, the tables are empty; the paths quiet. An elderly man sweeps a long-handled net across the surface of the water, skimming fallen leaves and water bugs.

“HeHello, little girl,” he says.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m cleaning the pool,” he answers.

“Why?”

He laughs, “Because I am a ‘do-gooder,’ I guess.”
I wonder what a “do-gooder” is and decide it must be a type of magical person who performs good deeds wherever they are needed. The man looks like the Professor Marvel from The Wizard of Oz. Since I am new and have no one to play with, I ask him for help in finding a friend.

He sweeps the net across the surface of the pool, deep in thought.

“Now, let’s see,” he says. “Seems to me there is a little girl about your age here.”

He pulls at his chin and takes the net out of the water.

“Diana—I think that’s her name. I’ll bet she would love to be your friend!”

I say the name out loud—happy to be in possession of a title—the name of my new friend.

“Diana. Where does she live?”

I look around at the rows and rows of matching trails leading to matching brown doors.

“Follow me,” says the do-gooder, and I do.

He leads me through a series of labyrinth-like paths away from the pool area and behind a row of ugly bushes three-feet high, where we come to another sidewalk. The sun has baked the white concrete all day, and it hurts my feet to walk on it, but he tells me we are near the place where I will find my new friend, and so I follow him, uncomplaining, to a brown door several feet away.

“This is where Diana lives,” he says. “You just knock there, and tell her you’re looking for a playmate.”
He walks back to the pool to finish sweeping. Now he has done two good deeds in one day, I think.

Looking back at this moment as I write, it is a wonder I survived childhood at all. But things were different back then. People put their children out the door and told them to come back before dark. There were no car seats; no seatbelts, for that matter. We rode down the freeways of Houston with our heads or feet sticking out of open car windows; we chewed on lead pencils, rode our bicycles with our hair blowing in the wind. We fell. We bled. We scabbed and healed. We had already survived mumps, measles, chicken pox and other maladies before Kindergarten. There were none of the protections imposed upon the children of today. My mom says no one gave much thought to what could go wrong. Parents figured, “If they live, they live,” and hoped for the best. It was a time when faith—if not religion—was still strong. My parents were chain smokers, and when we finally got air conditioning in the cars, they smoked with the windows up, so as not to let out the cold air. I was chain smoking from the time I was born. I was free-ranging before there was such a term. My children will never know such freedom.

Unmolested by the do-gooder, I stand in front of the tall brown door awaiting my introduction to Diana—just one knock away from friendship, inclusion, play. I knock, and I wait. Behind the door, I hear a voice, soft and Southern, asking if they are expecting anyone because there is a little girl at the door.

“No. Who is it?” demands a small voice, and I have my first awkward moment in what will become a lifetime of them.
The door opens, and a woman with hair teased and sprayed into the shape of a space helmet (the look is the height of fashion at the moment), green eyes lined and lashed like a sphinx, full lips painted ruby red, stands before me looking like she has stepped right out of Cosmopolitan.

“Well, hello there, Darlin’!”

Her voice pitches higher at the end of the sentence, the way folks sound when they’re talking to a dog —sparkly.

“Diana—Come here. You have a new friend! What’s your name, Darlin’? ”

I look past the lovely lady and see two white-stockinged legs and a pair of black patent buckle shoes dangling from beneath a disc-shaped bamboo chair. The chair revolves, and there is Diana—dressed in a red velvet jumper and white blouse buttoned up to her neck, a giant black bow in her dark brown hair. It is the only frivolous thing about her. She studies me with a serious expression, sizing me up, then pushes off with her feet again and spins the chair around so that she is facing the wall.

“Mommy, tell that little girl that I don’t know her,” she says.

“Diana, Honey. Don’t be rude. What’s your name, Darlin’?”

“Tammy,” I whisper, feeling very small and uninvited.

“Diana, this is Tammy,” introduces her mother. “My name is Pam,” she says.

“How old are you? Did you just move here? Where is your mother, Darlin’?”
Diana spins around again to give me another once over before turning again to the wall then spinning all the way around and pushing with her feet to make the chair go round again and again. It unnerves me that she doesn’t smile while she does this, even though it looks like so much fun.

“Can I spin, too?” I ask.

“No, it’s dangerous,” she says. “You’re too little.”

“I’m five and a half,” I say.

“I’m six already,” pronounces Diana, “and I don’t feel like playing with you right now. Come back tomorrow, and we’ll see.”

With that, the terms of our friendship are set.

For the next two years, I follow Diana around like a puppy dog. She makes the rules. I obey. We play daily in her apartment or mine. Her mother—recently divorced, in her 20s, becomes my mother’s best friend—a friendship that endures to this day, though they haven’t lived in the same state for over 30 years. When they do speak, they pick up from their last conversation, laughing, crying.

My world revolves around Diana, though I am merely one of an entire kid-entourage that moves in orbit around her. She rules like a queen at Tally Ho apartments—barking orders, leading with her chin raised high into the air as she walks, a line of children of various ages trailing behind her like baby ducks.
When we play Princess and the Frog, I am always the Frog. There is never a question about it. And I always have to die at the end of the game. When she tells us to jump from the second story staircase into a pile of leaves, each child in turn obeys, laughing and rolling their way out of broken bones that I know will be mine if I follow.

I say, “No, I don’t want to.”

And she says, “Fine. Then I won’t play with you anymore.”

I say, “That’s not fair. I don’t want to be your friend either, then.”

And she says, “Who cares?”

There is no way to win with her—she has the upper hand because she is entirely dispassionate about me. She is independence personified, and she needs to be in control more than she needs an extra friend. Something in me recognizes this in her, and knowing that I can be tossed out of favor so easily, I obey.

I jump—and land hard. My cries scatter the gang of children every which way, and I think I catch just the hint of a smile as Diana looks back over her shoulder and runs in the direction of home. My fate is cast like a penny into an empty wishing well. I begin a bottomless descent into inferiority and dysfunctional relationships. Diana is my first love.

Like me, she visits her father every other Sunday. Each Monday afternoon, she leads me into her bedroom to show off a new silver dollar coin, which she adds to her collection atop her dresser like a trophy.

“Look what MY father gave me,” she says, polishing the coin and holding high between us to catch the light’s reflection. “What did YOUR father give you?”
I have nothing to show.

My father lives in a furnished rental—the only personal items in his apartment are a marble chess set and the gold-embossed leather bound beginnings of a classic book set, currently containing the titles, Moby Dick, Huckleberry Finn and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He picks me up once a week and drives to the dismal apartment unit, where he attempts to teach me how to play Chess before closing the door to his room so he can nap. Bored, alone, I wander the concrete hallways looking for bugs, pennies or humans about my size—rarely finding any. I eventually discover the ice machine in the laundry room, and I amuse myself by filling plastic buckets with ice and carrying them back to the apartment to put in glasses of Dr. Pepper.

When the sun is setting and the room grows dark, I pry my father’s bloodshot eyes open with my fingers and thumb until he is able to hold them open on his own. In the car on the way back to my mother’s apartment, he sings songs out of tune and drops Visine into his eyes to clear them.

Years later, I find out that Diana had been receiving those weekly silver coins in exchange for Daddy kisses. As children, we were best friends, but there were secrets about our grown-ups we were honor-bound to keep—even from each other. How could we have spoken about the love we were asked to prove in so many strange ways?
Captain Hook and the Chicken

It’s 1967, and my father and I are singing “My Darling, Clementine” in the car. We are on the old highway, the one with the hills that make my stomach feel queasy when my father flies over them at 80 miles per hour. The ride from Houston to Kirvin takes about three and a half hours, unless we hit traffic. My father stops to buy Dr. Pepper and peanuts. He fills up the gas tank as I empty the peanut bag into the Dr. Pepper bottle and watch the soda pop fizz to the top. This is a favorite game we play. Whoever finishes the peanuts before the Dr. Pepper is gone wins. My father chug-a-lugs the entire bottle in one sip, peanuts and all, but I like to catch the peanuts with my tongue and then nibble on them as I draw the soda through my front teeth. I like the burning sensation of the salt and sugar on my lips.

I am five years old and my parents have been divorced for two years. I see my father every other Sunday. When my mother has special plans, my father takes me for the whole weekend to visit my Grandma Trice and Paw. I like visiting my Grandma Trice. Sometimes, she takes me up to her office and lets me type. When I cough, she tells me I sound just like a baby seal and she gives me peppermint candy to suck on. The television is always on at my grandparents’ house. My grandfather sleeps in a recliner in front of it. He sometimes wakes up and yells at the people on the screen. My grandmother hollers for him to hush and he has a coughing fit and goes back to sleep. Mostly, everyone ignores my grandfather. Or they make fun of him, rolling their eyes and clucking their tongues. But when he’s not in his recliner, when he’s
up and about, working in the field or fishing in the tank or fixing the roof on the chicken house, they all tip toe around him, like he’s a circus animal let out of his cage.

To me, he is Captain Hook. Tall, stooped, a rusty pointed hook on his left arm, the sound of his heavy boots on the linoleum floor and his low but powerful voice, gravely with emphysema, inspires a mixture of fascination and dread in me. I know that he loves me because he gave me a baby chick once, yellow and fuzzy and helpless. When it died, a week later, I was devastated because I had promised him that I would take care of it like a mother. He taught me how to ride Cocoa, the pony, when I was only four, and he named the new calf “Tammy Cow”. Still, I have seen my uncle wrestle him to the floor to get a gun out of his hand when he threatened to shoot a man.

After singing through our entire repertoire of songs (Home on the Range, The Yellow Rose of Texas, My Darlin’ Clementine, Red River Valley....) five or six times, my father tells me ghost stories for the rest of the ride. All of my father’s ghost stories are set in Kirvin, at the “old green house on the hill,”. Or, “in the bottoms...where the treetops form an arch across the road and it gets so dark that you can’t even see the back of your hand in front of your face.”. The protagonists are usually my dad and my Uncle Don, but sometimes he tells stories about my Granny Goose being visited by the ghost of her dead husband. He always tells these stories as if they were the gospel truth and, as a result, by the time we reach the turn-off to the farm road leading to my grandparent’s house, my hair is standing on end, I need to pee, and I’m afraid to get out of the car.

It’s after dark when we finally turn onto the red-gravel road that is blanketed by an eerie mist of low-lying fog. The Oldsmobile bumps and shimmies over potholes and puddles
until we reach the familiar driveway and the little house with the yellow porch light. I smell my grandmother’s cooking as my father opens the car door. Fried Chicken, black-eyed peas and gravy, mashed potatoes, string beans, hot cornbread, and freshly baked pecan pie for dessert. The screen door slams and my grandmother steps out onto the front porch to give me a hug and help my father with our bags. My grandfather sleeps through dinner, but wakes up when my great uncle comes by for desert. Lying in his recliner, he stuffs a pipe with tobacco, using his left elbow-nub to hold the pipe in place. I watch from the sofa, as he holds the pipe between his teeth and flips his Zippo across his pant leg to light the flame. My grandmother complains about the smoke, but I find the butane and pipe-tobacco smell comforting.

As the grown-ups talk and watch T.V., I fall asleep on the sofa, underneath the crocheted afghan. After the 10 o’clock news, my father carries me into my grandmother’s room and tucks me into her bed. I fall asleep to the sound of crickets, tree frogs, Dominoes, and muffled laughter from the other room. Sometime in the middle of the night, I wake up in a cold sweat, unsure of where I am. My grandmother is snoring beside me and the door to her room is slightly ajar. The bathroom light is on, across the hallway, and I see my grandfather stumbling against the bathroom door, his pants around his ankles. I see him in profile, against the yellow light. His wrinkled buttocks sag and there is baggy, loose skin hanging down between his legs. He is holding something in his hand and I am embarrassed to be witness to whatever it is, but at the same time, I’ve never seen a naked man and so I keep my eyes almost shut in case my grandmother wakes up and sees me, but I watch as my grandfather pees standing up.

The next morning, I wake to the sound of a rooster. It’s daybreak, and the window sill is covered in condensation. The room is damp and cool and the light shining through the lace curtains has a pinkish quality. I smell bacon frying in the kitchen and can hear my grandmother’s
lilting soprano laughter and the low rasp of my grandfather’s voice, telling a funny story to my father. Tossing back the electric blanket and the chenille bedspread, I slide off of the bed and run barefoot into the kitchen.

“Well, my Lordy...Look who’s up with the Rooster! Mornin’, Tammy Trice. Come give your ol. grandma a hug.”

I crawl into my grandmother’s lap and take a piece of bacon from the plate in front of her.“Mornin, Grandma Trice. Can I ride Cocoa?.”

My grandfather grumbles something unintelligible as he straps on his hook with his teeth.

My grandmother smiles gently and plays with my fingers while she says, “.Well, darlin’, we had to put ol’ Cocoa out to pasture over yonder at the Brill’s place a while back. Poor thing had hoof rot. But I reckon if your Daddy wouldn’t mind ridin’ over there with the truck and bringin’ him back for ya, your grandpa’d saddle ‘em up and let ya ride him. What do you think, Batch? ”

My grandfather coughs and spits out of the screen door before he says, “I reckon it’s up to Doug,” then walks outside to his shed in the back of the house.

“Doug? You gonna go get this girl’s pony? I’ve got some paperwork to finish up at the office, but I won’t be gone too long. Reckon she’ll be alright here while you go.”
The front door is open wide and I can see the Bluebonnets and Indian
Paintbrushes in the field across the road. It is noon and the bees are lazily dropping loads of
pollen on fragile flower-tops. My grandfather is lying in his recliner, watching television or
sleeping. I can’t tell which. The air-conditioner is on high and I am lying under the afghan on the
sofa. I hear the old Australian Shepherd barking at something in the back pasture. Maybe he has
cornered a rabbit. He’s a funny looking country dog, with one blue eye and one brown eye. His
tail always wags when he sees me. My grandmother feeds him table scraps after every meal.
He’s an outdoor dog and he always smells bad. The barking stirs up the chickens in the hen
house and my grandfather sits up in his chair and yells for the dog to shut up. He does.

My grandfather looks at me and asks me if I am sleeping. I tell him, “No,” and
feel my cheeks flush, as I remember watching him go to the bathroom the night before. There is
a wrestling match on the television and my grandfather lights his pipe and watches the screen. I
don’t like wrestling, but I pretend to be interested in the match, so that I don’t have to think of
something to say. My grandfather looks at me and scratches himself.

“What you doin’ under that cover? You cold?”

I’m not cold. I’m hot and sweaty under the afghan, but I like the feeling of having
it tucked under my feet and under my chin.

“Ugh uh.”

“My Lord, girl. It’s a hundred degrees outside. You can’t be cold. Why don’t you
take that there blanket off-a-ya?”
I’m suddenly uneasy. I don’t want to take the blanket off of me, but can’t think of a way to tell him why I like having it on, so I stare at the TV intently. My grandfather is quiet for a moment, then he has a little coughing spell, dumps his pipe and settles back into his chair. Except he’s not looking at the television anymore. He’s staring at me. I feel his eyes on me and I try to focus as hard as I can at the television screen, so that he will think that I don’t notice.

“Have you ever done it?” he whispers.

My heart skips a beat and I squirm uneasily underneath the afghan.

“Done what?” I ask in a small voice.

“You know....”

“No, I don’t know...what?”

“You wanna do it?”

“What?”

“They call it...wrestlin’...just like they’re doin’ on TV. You wanna wrestle with me?”

I stare at the television, watching the big man in the funny outfit push the other man to the ground and bounce up and down on his back. The audience is cheering as the man on the bottom grimaces and screams and kicks his legs back and forth. I know that this is not what my grandfather has in mind. I know that he must have seen me watching him the night before. I am curious, and ashamed. I whisper “No,” but without conviction.
The front door is wide open. The field across the road is bright blue and red with flowers. I hear the bees, the dog, the chickens. It’s a hundred degrees outside and the air-conditioner is on high. My afghan is too small to cover my head. My grandfather lifts it with his hook and reaches inside with his hand. He is touching me, rubbing against me. He smells like pipe tobacco and Whiskey. His face feels like sandpaper on my skin. He’s too big and the couch is too small and the door is wide open and my grandmother might come back or my father with the pony.

He leads me to his room, in the back of the house, away from the wrestling match on T.V, away from the open door and the air-conditioner, away from the Bluebonnets and Indian paintbrushes in the field. He sits in his rocking chair by the window, and pulls me onto his lap. He’s touching me and I feel like I have to go pee. I squirm away from his hand, but his hook is under my chin, pointed and rusty. He is unzipping his pants.

I look outside at the backyard, where the dog is chasing something, his tail wagging, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. I remember the time my grandfather chopped the head off a chicken with an axe. It ran in circles for what seemed like a full minute, headless, bloody, beyond doomed...already dead, dinner...running in circles in the backyard.

My grandfather had laughed at the chicken, trying to escape what had already happened. When it had finally stopped moving, Grandma Trice had picked it up by its feet and carried it into the kitchen. I’d helped her pull all the feathers off, and when it was pink and naked, my grandmother had scrubbed it down, in the sink. The struggle had ended and now it was just a thing—breaded, deep-fried, then eaten.
The thing between my grandfather’s legs is hard and wet. He rubs it where I have to go pee and his breathing becomes shallow and rhythmic. He is trying to push it inside of me and it hurts. I begin to cry and I try to pull my legs together.

“No, Paw... Don’t…”

I struggle to get away and he holds me tighter with his good arm. I am crying louder now, fighting against his intrusion, kicking, squirming, pushing his arm.

“It’s just wrastlin’....Don’t you like to wrastle?”

He laughs, and then wheezes until he doubles over, coughing. I slide off of his lap and run, screaming. He chases me into the living room, his pants around his knees, his thing dangling in front of him, wrinkled, bloated, and ugly. I am on one side of the oval rag-rug and he is on the other, his arm and his hook outstretched, his weight shifting from side to side. He is laughing. He thinks that I am cornered, like a chicken in the yard. My back is to the front door. It is wide open, but the screen has a latch that I might not be able to reach. The nearest neighbors are a half mile away, in the old Victorian house at the end of the gravel road. My grandfather takes a step in my direction.

“Stop, Paw! If you don’t stop— I won’t love you anymore!”

He stops, frozen. He is not laughing. He looks confused. I turn my back on him and stand on my tip-toes to push the latch open on the screen door. It slams behind me as I run across the dry lawn, crying as the stickers tear my bare feet. I’m running as fast as I can, down the red-gravel, beside the Bluebonnets and Indian Paintbrushes, toward the old house at the end
of the road where the grown-ups will take care of me. I run for what feels like forever. The road seems to stretch as I run. I am crying and naked underneath my dress.

When I arrive at the door of the three-story yellow and white house with the big swing on the front porch, I can’t reach the doorbell, so I bang on the leaded glass panes and scream, “Help me!”

Two old ladies live inside, “spinsters,” my grandmother calls them. Today, they have visitors, nephews that are only a bit older than myself. I am hysterical and they give me a glass of water to calm me down then ask what in the world is the matter. When I tell them that my grandfather was chasing me and trying to put his thing in mine, they get very flustered and take me upstairs, away from the boys. They don’t hug me or try to comfort me. Instead, one of the sisters gives me a pair of boy’s underwear to put on then leaves me in a room by myself while she makes a phone call. I can hear her whispering outside the door, and I feel embarrassed and naughty.

After a while, she comes back into the room and sits down in front of me. She wrings her hands and doesn’t make eye contact with me as she speaks. She tells me that my grandmother is on the way home now and that I am to walk back to my grandparents’ house and tell my grandmother exactly what happened. She says that I should be the one to tell her because it is private, family business. She also tells me that I must not mention anything in front of the boys because they wouldn’t understand such things. Then she takes me downstairs and gives me and the boys cookies.

I nibble on the edge of the cookie as the boys stare at me. I’m not hungry but I don’t want to go back down the road, so I eat slowly. I think about my grandfather’s face when I
told him that I wouldn’t love him anymore, and I feel guilty for having said such a thing. I wonder if he is still standing in the living room with his pants down. I think about my father and the pony that has hoof rot and I start to cry again. The boys stare at me and one of the ladies takes me out onto the porch to wait until I see my grandmother’s car turn off the main the road.

When it does, the lady says to me, “Now you just run on home and tell her exactly what you told us and everything will be alright.”

I follow my grandmother into the bathroom and tell her while she is sitting on the toilet. She makes me repeat what I have said, “Paw tried to stick his thing in mine”, three times until I am almost shouting the words. Then she passes out, with her pants around her ankles and a wad of toilet paper in her hand.

Later, she fills the bathtub with lukewarm water a few inches deep, and we take a bath together. She shows me how to wash my private parts with a washcloth by demonstrating on her own body. After I am scrubbed clean, she powders me all over with sweet-smelling Avon powder from the pink plastic round box with the satin ribbon—the one that sits on the back of the toilet. She assures me that everything’s going to be just fine and that no one need ever know about what happened.

She tells me, “It’s our little secret, Tammy Trice.”

I am relieved not to have to tell my father or my mother.

The next day, I ride Coco in the backyard. My grandfather stays in the back room all day and I am glad when he doesn’t come out. My father shoots at bottles in the back pasture.
When it’s time to leave, my father scolds me when I refuse to give my grandfather a hug goodbye. My grandmother says, “Just leave her be, Doug,” and she gives me a napkin filled with hard candies to eat on the ride home.

While my father loads the bags into the car, my grandmother puts her arms around me and whispers in my ear, “Now remember, what you told me is our little secret. You’re a big girl and I know you can keep a secret. I love you, Sweetie.”

I am silent on the ride home. I rest my head against the window and make little hearts on the breath-fogged glass. My father sings “Home on the Range,” solo. I fall asleep watching the headlights on the yellow lane divider lines.
I start in the middle of the year at Little Bo Peep School and am late my first day. I take my place in the back row of long metal tables. The kids appear not to notice my arrival. There is a large American flag drooping from the corner wall. Double-hung windows along one wall look out onto a dusty playground and the metal monkey bars I will fall from, landing face-first on a bee, in weeks to come.

The toothy, bubble-haired teacher clicks on her heels to a portable record player on the edge of her desk. She carefully places the needle into a groove on the oily-black LP. Scratchy pops give way to the distorted tininess as the music is compressed through tiny, fabric-covered built-in speakers. She turns, smiles, and tells us all to stand up. We do, and she begins the Hokey Pokey. For a moment, I think she must be insane. Then I realize everyone is in on it, sticking their “right arm in” and their “right arm out,” turning all about. I stand motionless, watching the bizarre display. School is strange.

At lunchtime, boiled spinach is plopped onto my molded gray plastic tray. I know I am allergic to spinach and tell the lunch lady so, but she doesn’t believe me because there is no note from my mother. The kids at my table make fun of me when I refuse to eat the smelly green glop. I tell them I take shots because the doctor said I am allergic to spinach, bug droppings and pet dander. A short fat boy a smudge on his face pushes my shoulder with the palm of his chubby hand and grins maliciously. He says my mother is stupid because she forgot to send a note about the allergy.
I experience a new sensation. Fury. It gushes from my toes to my face, and I am dizzy with heat and a volcanic sort of trembling. I want to bite his face off for saying that my mother—my beautiful, sweet, lullaby-singing mother—is “stupid.” I am wild with the need to defend her, to make him see how wrong he is. My mother is perfect. She is everything. He is nothing—just a fat, stupid little boy with jelly on his face. I ball up my fists, and my ears ring. Then I collapse in a heap on the floor because now I have experienced another new sensation—doubt.

My mother forgot the note. Maybe she isn’t perfect after all.

A year later, it is fall, and there are scattered brown leaves crunching beneath my feet as I walk through the chipped concrete courtyard that separates the Kindergarten building from the Pre-K building. I head for the swings. The children part like a sea as I pass, and this is my first existentialist moment. Perhaps nobody exists, I think. There is only me here, and up there in Heaven, the angels are watching and laughing that I think all of this is real. It is all a big joke. I am the punchline.

I wear a large cardboard sign tied around my neck. It reads, “Don’t play with me. I bite.”

I will block this humiliation from my memory for 20 years until I will be sitting in a large conference room one weekend, having paid $300 to get something I will later be told does not exist at the est training when the question, “What was the first moment in your life you shut down—the first time you believed something false about yourself?” awakens the memory of wearing the placard and the spooky disconnect I had experienced. I realize with a chuckle that I
have been carrying this metaphorical sign around my neck my whole life, feeling like I don’t belong and can’t be trusted. It is indeed something worth “getting,”—enlightening, even if I did have to pay $300 to retrieve my own shitty memory. I remove the ghost sign from my neck and leave the seminar poorer, but wiser.
An Unquiet Mind

My Aunt Peggy and Uncle Johnny and their four children—two boys, two girls, all one year apart—live in Channel View, an older section of Houston named by its proximity to the Houston Ship Channel. Their house, like most of the homes in the area, is weather-beaten, with faded green asbestos shingles and a sad, gray roof that slumps in the middle. A single scruffy tree leans from a balding patch of ant-ridden weeds and broken bits of cardboard and coke bottles that is the front yard. There is a rusty chain link fence surrounding a tiny backyard that faces a garbage-strewn empty lot just behind the freight train tracks.

My Uncle Johnny, I’m told, was “quite a looker” in high school, when he and my Aunt Peggy fell in love and got married. Now, he is missing the middle finger on his left hand and has a belly that protrudes thickly over his giant silver belt buckle when he sits in his chair in the corner of the living room.

A truck driver, he is rarely home, so when he returns to his chair from his long out-of-town runs, my cousins and I climb on him while he wiggles his missing finger nub and talks like Donald Duck. He has a coin bank with an electronic hand that reaches up to snatch coins out of your hand. My cousins and I make him repeat this trick again and again, thrilling to the anticipation of being startled when the tiny, skeletal hand steals our pennies.

This is where I stay when my mother goes out of town or just needs a day or two to be alone. My Aunt Peggy, the middle of my maternal grandparents’ three daughters, is a saint. Overwhelmed by the strain of what amounts to the solo parenting of four children under the age of 10, she frequently adopts me into a house already busting at the seams. During the day, my
cousins and I climb the tree and play cowboys and Indians, popping snap guns at each other and pretending to die in the dirt. We throw shoes at the neighbor’s ugly black dog when he “gets stuck” to my cousin’s ugly white dog. When the shoes have no effect, we giggle and watch the yelping pair turn in awkward, locked circles until the neighbor comes outside with a broom and pries them apart.

When we want to buy cokes and candy from the store in town, we collect bottles and cans underneath the overpass until we have enough deposit money pooled to make and share a purchase. We travel in a group wherever we go, singing all the verses to Puff the Magic Dragon and the Circle Song. When my aunt needs to do laundry, she herds the five of us into the backseat of her station wagon, and we roll down the windows and stick our heads out until she goes inside. Then we roll up the windows and wait for her on the floor of the car with the doors locked in case someone tries to steal us. Each passerby is a potential child thief until she returns. Then we roll down the windows again and stick our tongues out at people in the cars behind us.

At night, we lie around on an oval braided rug or snuggle end-to-end under a blanket on the old, worn sofa. My aunt makes popcorn in the kitchen, and the smell feels like home to me. We watch Trapeze, and nobody shushes anyone when we discuss Kirk Douglas’ tights or squeal at the terrifying stunts.

I play on the bunkbeds or in the closet of the boys’ room, rummaging through the mess of broken plastic and metal trucks and cars to find a toy that my cousin Michael wants to play with. Then I keep it from him until we come to blows. When I bloody his nose, he screams and runs into the kitchen to my Aunt Peggy, who is tired and does not need the drama. I am separated
from the rest and spend a quiet hour snuggled into the soft blankets of her bedroom until the call she has put in to my vacationing mother is returned, and I am warned not to hit my cousin again.

I bathe in the deep bathtub with my cousin Glenda, and we play hide the soap until the water is so murky gray we have to grope each other to find the slippery, dissolving bar. We pull the drain plug, and the water tornadoes down the mysterious black, rust-rimmed hole while I watch in fascination until Glenda suggests I’d better get out before I get sucked down, too. I squeal and jump out of the tub, and my Aunt Peggy laughs and wraps me in a scratchy towel.

I sleep hugging the end of my cousin Terry’s full-sized bed—a saggy mattress and box spring on the floor. Glenda, two years older than me, lies squished between us and snoring. Sometime in the night, she wets the bed and the warm, pungent pee pools around my arms and legs. Terry, the oldest, is accustomed to the nightly disturbance. She gently nudges Glenda until she wakes up then prods us all into the bathroom where she washes us off, wipes off the plastic-covered mattress and changes the sheets. My cousins fall back to sleep, but I am hot and sweaty and kick off the covers on my side. My cheeks burn, and my head aches. I open my eyes in the dark and see menacing phantom figures swirling toward my face. I scream and kick at them until my Aunt Peggy flips on the light switch, and my cousins awaken, wondering what in the world is wrong.

I am swaddled in my aunt’s blankets now, and the light in her room stays on as she calls my mother long-distance to tell her I am sick—that my fever is very high. She gives me baby aspirin, and I fall asleep wrapped in the safety of her bedcovers.
I am lying in a hospital bed, my mother sleeping by my side. The nurse wakes us up to take my temperature. She takes pains to explain why she must insert this thing into my bottom and how it works. I listen patiently, then say, “Oh—a thermometer. Yes, I know.”

I ask my mother when we can go home. She explains that we have to stay here until the doctor comes in the morning. I suggest we just leave him a note explaining that we didn’t care to spend the night here and that we promise to come back in the morning. She thinks this is very funny, but it makes perfect sense to me. The bed is too small for the two of us, and people keep coming in and turning on the lights. How is anyone supposed to sleep around this place?

Several years later, after my aunt and uncle have divorced and remarried each other, when things are finally going well again, they leave the kids with friends at a high school football game to drive home. A drunk driver hits their truck on the passenger side. My uncle is not wearing a seat belt (practically nobody does in the 70s) and is thrown from the accident, which he survives. My Aunt Peggy is wearing her seatbelt and dies instantly.

My mother buys me a pretty navy blue dress to wear to the funeral. It hangs in my closet, unworn for the next two years, separated from the rest of my clothing by a space of two feet. I try not to look at it when I rummage through my closet for clothes every day. It menaces and reminds. It takes the shape of a grim reaper on a hanger. I am afraid of this dress.

My Aunt Peggy had always been slightly psychic. She had premonitions, precognitive dreams, strong “feelings” that people learned to listen to and heed. A few days after the accident and before the funeral, she visits her family—walks right into the house and sits down in her favorite chair in the living room. She tells them all she is okay and not to worry about her. Then
she is gone. My cousins and my Uncle Johnny all agree that this happened. After the funeral, she
appears to her best friend in a dream. She insists that she wants her to have her ring. The friend
talks to the air—tells my aunt that her wedding ring should go to her kids, not her. That she isn’t
about to ask Johnny for her wedding ring. Aunt Peggy tells her again—the ring. She wants her to
have it. The next morning, my uncle shows up at her house with my aunt’s birthstone ring. He
says my aunt visited him in a dream and insisted he bring it to her.

My mother talks about these things in front of me, and I begin walking around saying
silent prayers in my head—begging my Aunt Peggy to please, please, please not show herself to
me. I am terrified of finding her in my room or meeting her in a dream. At the funeral, my
grandmother had been upset that the funeral parlor had opted for a closed coffin viewing. She
had been inconsolable until they agreed to open the coffin so she could see my aunt’s destroyed
face and know for sure it was her. I overhear my Aunt Paula and my mom speaking about this—
shaking their heads, saying how could she want to see that? I imagine my Aunt Peggy’s face
burned and scarred, and it is this I am afraid to see in the dark, alone in a room. I am afraid to
sleep, afraid of my closet. I mutter to myself, plead with her not to haunt me.

Lying in a motel room bed one night on a vacation visit with my dad and step-mom,
President Nixon resigns on TV. My father yells at the screen, calls our president awful names,
chastises the flickering, stammering image as though he can hear. My step-mother shushes my
father and shakes her head. Yes, it is shameful, she admits, but yelling at the TV isn’t helping
anything. My father clicks off the television and turns over in a huff. The room is dark, and I
listen to the sounds of tree frogs and wind in the branches. Tomorrow, we will go inner tubing
and swimming in the river. I have been keyed up all day, excited to be on vacation with my dad
and step-mom. But now I am afraid. I have never been inner tubing. I’m a good swimmer, but
aren’t there water moccasins in the rivers around here? And what is the date? I can’t remember, but it might be the 7th. My aunt was killed on the 7th. Or was her funeral on the 7th? I am not sure, but suddenly the number 7 takes the shape of my navy blue dress hanging in the closet back home, and I feel like the angel of death has followed me to these woods, this A-frame motel that appeared so inviting when we pulled into the parking lot several hours ago. I picture our room from the outside, looking in. Dark, unprotected. The woods are full of bears, bobcats, snakes, coyotes. I don’t know if the windows are properly shut—did my father open them tonight? Did he remember to lock them? And what is the date? Is it the 7th, or the 8th? Maybe 8 is also a bad number.

I start counting inside my head, and I slip past the numbers 7 and 8 very quickly, on to the safety of 9, then 10. I say a prayer, beg God to please tell my Aunt Peggy not to feel the need to come visit me—to tell her I love her, but I don’t want to see her. I’m afraid. I’m ashamed to be afraid, but I’m afraid. Seven, eight, nine… I blur the numbers together in my head as I count, until they become, “snine.” That way, I can avoid the number of death and the number after the number of death, which also might be tainted, due to its proximity to the number of death.

This is the beginning of my anxiety taking on a tangible form. The private obsessional rituals I invent to fend off evil begin to consume much of the space inside my head—so much so that I have little attention for other thoughts. I tread carefully to avoid cracks in the sidewalk that might harm my mother. I count everything, and I am careful never to land on the numbers 7 or 8—even if it means taking extra bites or steps or walking backwards down the stairs. I come up with a mantra, “Oh, my goodness. Oh, my gosh,” that is supposed to keep the awful thoughts at bay, but then I begin counting the number of times I say the mantra, and to avoid the stress of landing on the wrong (fear-inducing) count, I adapt the phrase to,
“Ohmygoodnessohmygoshohmygoodnessohmygoshohmygoodnessohmygosh.” Repeated in such a fashion, it is impossible for me to keep up with how many times I’ve said each phrase, thus removing the awareness of landing on a 7 or 8 and having to start the whole chant all over again.

I line my stuffed animals up around my bed like sentinels, each bear positioned in exactly the same place in the same fashion every night. Any disruption to their order—for instance, should one bear be knocked over when my mother is tucking me in at night—means I have to get up and start the ritual all over again, placing each bear in position relative to the order of the others. I also have rules about how many hugs I give each bear—more for Smokey, my favorite, less for Teddy, my third favorite. I stress over how many hugs to give Pooh Bear because I have had him since the day I was born and love him very much, but Smokey is my protector, will protect me from forest fires. I received Pooh and Smokey within days of each other. In fact, nobody is really sure which one came first, but there must be an order of affection and import, and Smokey has become the dominant bear in my mind. I feel sorry for Pooh, who was probably here first and may mind that he gets hugs second, after Smokey. Teddy’s fur is scratchy, and his buttons are cold. I worry about not holding him like the others, since he is one of three who has been with me as long as I can remember, but the expression in his eyes is far away. I decide he doesn’t mind. Probably. Maybe he does.

I lose sleep over this. Over everything. At 11 years old, I am in a perpetual state of fear and exhaustion.
Sometime over the summer between first and second grades, a college student visits Tally Ho and offers free IQ testing for the rag-tag band of children that roams its courtyards. There are roughly a dozen of us, but only five are in the inner circle, meaning our parents have become like extended family and take turns car-pooling us to school, after-care, amusements, drive-through restaurants. We are—from oldest to youngest—Terri, a shy, lanky 10 year-old with dirty blond hair, whose bangs are always just a little bit too long, Diana—whose position as pack leader has been somewhat diffused by the addition of the older, blonder girl, me, Kimberly, and her little brother Tag, whose parents have divorced, then re-married each other. The angelically tiny and blond Kimberly is a year younger than Diana and myself, and her two year-old brother Tag is more of a mascot than a true member of our little team. He is treated gently, fawned over and looked after as he waddles behind the herd.

We take turns with the college girl, identifying shapes in blobs of ink, reading picture books, answering silly questions and scratching out numbers on mimeographed paper. Parts of the test are fun, but I can hear the rest of the kids as they laugh and chase outside when it is not their turn, and I feel trapped behind the window and antsy to rejoin the others. When the testing is finished, I am set free to play, and I soon forget all about the event.

Weeks later, my mother beams. Though she has been admonished not to, reveal my IQ score to me, she can’t help herself because, she says, my I.Q. score is in the “genius” range, as is Diana’s. She makes me swear not to tell anyone—especially Diana, since my score was just the
teensiest bit higher than hers. She sends me back outside to rejoin my pack, feeling like an incognito swan that has managed to land into a pack of ugly ducklings. I look down my nose at the others—especially little Kimberly, who I now realize is too young and silly to be bothered with by a soon-to-be-second-grade genius. I ally myself even more strongly with Diana—our similar test scores proof that we are soul-sisters, worthy of each other’s company. The secret knowledge of my new, superior intellectual status smooths over the frustrating inferiority complex that has thus far been the only fly in my Diana-worship ointment.

*I am smarter than Diana,* I think, but cannot say.

Just knowing it gives me new confidence with her, and our friendship begins to take on the casual camaraderie that exists between equals. We give up *The Frog and the Princess* and, pinning ourselves inside my mother’s old red or blue crinoline-skirted prom dresses, donning dark sunglasses, balancing at the toes of our moms’ shiny high heels, topping our rubber banded ponytails with falls unpinned from the Styrofoam wig-heads lining my mother’s bureau, we opt for playing dress-up instead.
Mrs. Finch is my first grade teacher. She is old and cranky, and she doesn’t like me. One day, I am sitting at my little desk, using the beak on my plastic toucan necklace to carve away the remaining strings of gum from my front right tooth. It pops out, and I bleed on the workbook, desk and shirt. Mrs. Finch is annoyed at the interruption and tells me to go stand in the bathroom until the bleeding stops. She slams my blood-spattered workbook shut and sighs a loud, irritated sigh that indicates to the rest of my classmates how disruptive and rude I am. They, in turn, stare at me like I have three heads as I make my way through the desks and into the bathroom.

I look in the mirror and smile to see what my face looks like to others, now that I am minus one front tooth. Blood drips down my chin, and I dab a brown paper towel in sink water and press it to my gum to stop the bleeding. I know I have done something wrong, but I’m not sure what it was. I carefully wrap the tooth inside another paper towel and shove it into my pocket. I pinch a bit of bloody gum tissue off my toucan’s beak and stand in the bathroom longer than I need to because I know that I will have to face the disapproving class and teacher again when I return to my desk. Soon, I hear laughter and the scuffling of feet, as the class heads to the playground for recess. I return to my desk, put my workbook inside the little metal cubby underneath my seat then fold my arms and lay my head on the desk and wait for recess to be over.

I want to be at home, where I can place the tooth under my pillow and wait for the tooth fairy to come. I know my mother will be happy to see the tooth—my first to fall out—and I
decide not to tell her that I carved it out with the toucan beak instead of just waiting for it to come out on its own.

This is the only memory I have of first grade.

I have a photo—an old Polaroid, its colors muted with age, in which I am posing in front of the gates at Tally Ho on my first day of second grade. I’m wearing a navy blue plaid jumpsuit, and my head is cocked to one side, one eye shut tight against a beam of sunlight behind the photographer—my mom. I stand opposite my long shadow, a small brown book satchel by my side. My hair is pulled and poofed into a “some up and some down” do and tied with a thick piece of yarn. I want to look like That Girl’s Marlo Thomas or Karen Valentine, from Room 222. I am squinting a lopsided smile because the sun is in my eyes. One of my knee socks has already slipped down, but I look happy.

It is early in the second grade school year, and our class has just returned from recess. One desk—the one that sits closest to mine on the right—has been emptied while we played outside. It is Diana’s desk. Her notebooks, crayons, pencils and papers have been removed from the fake wood grain surface. The lead-darkened pencil groove is now empty, as is the little metal cubby underneath the seat.

Class resumes, and no one says anything about where Diana has gone. The empty desk appears sinister. Its missing student—where is she?—remains a mystery as the day wears on in agonizing slowness.

It is Diana’s mom’s turn to drive us home from school. She asks me to wait in the car while she speaks with the principal. I scan the playground looking for Diana. After several minutes, I am relieved to see her heading towards the car with her mother. Her arms are full of
workbooks and mimeographed practice pages. She slides into the seat beside me and tells me she has been moved up and is now a third grader. I frown because it makes no sense. Diana is a second-grader, like me. We still have a whole school year ahead of us before moving up to third grade. How can she be a third-grader? Her mother explains to me that Diana’s IQ test scores were so high that her teachers felt she would be better off skipping second grade—that it would be a waste of time for her. Since the third grade gets out a half-hour after the second-graders, different carpool arrangements must be made for the after-school pick-up.

I feel lost, confused. I know that my test score was higher than Diana’s, so why am I not moving up too? I think about the empty desk beside me in the classroom, and I realize that I am being abandoned. With Diana by my side, I had never bothered to befriend my other classmates at Little Bo Peep.

Diana pulls out a thinly ruled notebook filled with pencil loops and unfamiliar markings. I push my thickly-ruled bright red Little Chief pad underneath my seat and look at the hieroglyphics in Diana’s lap.

“We’re learning cursive, see?” she says, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

I ask her what third grade is like, and she shrugs.

“Okay, I guess. The kids are big.”

“Actually, they’re not, dear,” her mother chimes in from the front seat. “You started Kindergarten late, and most of those kids are about the same age as you. They only look larger because you’re used to being around younger kids.”
I ponder this lesson in perspective, and I realize that her mother is right—more than half a year older, Diana has always seemed a bit taller and more mature than me and the other kids in our class. I wonder why I have never noticed it before. I wish I could wake up in yesterday—when my best friend was my age, in second grade, like me, and unable to write in cursive.

Though we will continue to share our morning rides to Little Bo Peep, and though I will still see her at Tally Ho and three days a week at our after-care program, my best friend is already gone—replaced by an older, more mature stranger who can write in cursive.

School must have lost meaning for me at this point because I cannot remember my teacher’s face or a single moment of the rest of second grade at Little Bo Peep. No longer able to rely on the carpool arrangements, Diana’s mother removes her from Soho Nursery, where we have attended after-care since Kindergarten. She enrolls Diana instead at Gay’s Nursery—a much larger facility that provides bussing from Little Bo Peep. Because I am miserable, my mother tries to cheer me up by sending me to Gays, as well, but I don’t know any of the kids there, and my bus of second-graders arrives an hour before Diana’s bus of older kids. The groups remain separated throughout the afternoon seeing each other from opposite ends of the play yard during shared recess.

The new girl at Gays, I have cooties. The children make fun of me. They race around me in circles, touching my arm with the tip of one finger and then chasing each other to deliver the cooties to those unlucky enough to be caught. When I cry, they call me a baby and leave me alone, disgusted. My mother tells me to ignore them, so I do. I make friends with a tree that stands in the middle of the play yard. I speak to it and stand beneath its majestic limbs. It grows within a circle that is filled with mulch. There are other trees on the playground at Gays, but this
one is the largest. I imagine it hears my thoughts as I stand beneath its soft leaves, bathed in its cool green shadow. The kids decide that I am too crazy to bother with, and they stop tormenting me and just ignore me altogether. Their rejection is complete. When I call out and wave to Diana from the opposite end of the playground, comforted each day by the sight of her arriving bus, she ignores me, too. I spend hours lying beneath my tree, looking up at cloud shapes through its soft leaves.
The Zipper

Diana moves away from Tally Ho and leaves our increasingly fragmented gang of apartment urchins when her mom remarries. Soon after, my mother and I move to a dull brown complex with larger, more modern apartments. At Country Club Village, our new two bedroom is one flight up the concrete steps, facing the pool. My mother loves the vaulted ceiling and master bedroom with shutters that can be opened to overlook the living room downstairs. My new room is beneath my mother’s—a small, square carpeted box with narrow windows overlooking a chain linked patch of grass and a massive noisy air conditioning unit. The long, horizontal window sills are positioned just above the level of my head, so I can’t see outside without standing on a chair.

Plagued with repeated bouts with pneumonia and chronic bronchitis for most of my young life, I have been diagnosed with allergies. My mother has recently given up trying to wrestle me into the kitchen for my weekly allergy shots and has decided that the shots are simply a hoax—useless, expensive, and causing unnecessary pain for me and for her. She stops giving them to me.

I am allergic to spinach, feathers, wool, dogs, cats, dust mites, roach feces, and most of my stuffed animals. Since our dogs are part of the family, my mother does not think a moratorium on pets is a realistic ambition, so she has ignores this part of my diagnosis. Because of my desperate resistance, she has also given up on her initial plan to do away with my army of stuffed bears, lions, bunnies and giraffes. Instead, she proposes a compromise. The stuffed
animals can remain in my room as long as they sit in the windowsill and not in my bed. I am not allowed to touch them.

Now, in my new room, they are lined up side by side, staring at me with their sad, black button eyes from their unreachable perch—all but one. Smokey Bear has slept with me every night since I was born. Without Smokey, sleep is impossible. Since my mother has to wake up early each morning to get ready for work and take me to school, she allows me to sleep with my bear—not understanding, apparently, how this one indulgence—along with our periodic dogs—undermines the whole plan. I suffer from chronic lung and sinus ailments to this day, and I still have Smokey Bear, who, along with Winnie the Pooh, watches me with glassy amusement from his high perch atop the bookshelf in my bedroom. I have also never been without pets. Given the choice between safety and love, I still choose love.

A woman at Country Club Village runs a small daycare out of her apartment. My mother signs me up for the summer. The apartment is located in an older, shabbier building at the opposite end of the complex. Aside from a tattered brown sofa, a small round dining table, and a few cots that are pulled out of the bedroom’s walk-in closet at naptime each day, there is no furniture. The children range from a newly walking toddler, whose diapers sag with an untended load, to several small boys. I am the only girl in the group. I have no memory at all of the caregiver, though I know she must have been there. What I do remember of this place is its dirty tan carpets, the mingling odor of diaper and macaroni and cheese, the bright sunlit bedroom where we were required to lie still and quiet on our cots for an hour each afternoon, and the walk-in closet where we climbed the built-in shelf unit and jumped on cot mattresses and blankets on the floor.
The boys are rowdy, and my days here feel interminable. The baby is annoying—I grow to hate him and his stinky diaper and ever-present dripping milk bottle clutched in his fat little hands. I make mean faces at him whenever he toddles towards me. In the closet, the boys and I play, “You show me yours, and I’ll show you mine,” though none of us really has much to show, so it’s boring after the first time or two.

One day, as we all squirm silently on our little nap cots in the bedroom, the summer sun sending its beams of suffocating heat through the bare, horizontal window, David, the boy whose cot is next to mine, whispers to me, “I’ll be your boyfriend if you let me do it to you.”

“Okay,” I say, happy at the thought of having a friend, even if it’s a boy.

When naptime is over, David closes the two of us inside the closet and tells the others not to enter for any reason because we have to talk about something “private.” Once inside the closet, David unzips his pants and pulls down his underwear just enough to reveal his “thing.” I stand there looking at it—a tiny red protrusion that is sticking up just a bit as it peeks above the blue elastic band of his lowered underpants.

“Let me see yours,” he whispers.

I acquiesce and pull down my underwear just a bit then lift the edge of my dress to reveal the little slit “down there” in the same place where his thing has popped out. He concentrates and shuffles towards me a few inches until his thing and my slit are touching. He puts his arms around my waist and plants a tight-lipped kiss on my mouth.

“There,” he says. “We did it.”
He pulls his underwear back up, and I follow his lead and do the same just as one of the boys throws open the closet door and demands to know what we have been doing in here for so long.

“Nothing,” says David, pushing past the boy to leave me behind in the closet, warm with shame and another, new feeling. I need to pee so bad I feel like I might have wet my pants. I can’t make eye contact with the kid who has opened the door. It must be obvious what David and I have been doing in here. I feel guilty, exposed, embarrassed. And something else—

Over the summer, David and I repeat the ritual twice—once, lying on top of each other, our pants around our ankles, our bodies balanced precariously on top of the giant air conditioning unit behind my bedroom wall, the second time in my bedroom during a game of “doctor.”

He is the patient, and I am the nurse (and, apparently, also the office cashier because I use my little toy cash register to ring up his payment before escorting him to my bed.) I cover him up with my frayed pink and purple daisy bedspread.

“Hey!” he whispers. “Wanna do it?”

My heart skips a beat.

“No. My mommy might see us.”

David thinks for a moment and then says, “Tell her not to come in.”

I am torn between my feelings of guilt and the desire to experience the unique sensation that occurs only on contact. I tell him to wait a minute, and I stick a plastic toy thermometer in his mouth. I get a piece of construction paper from my desk and write in fat red crayon letters: “DO NOT ENTER!” I tape the note to my door and close it quietly then turn back to my patient.
I walk toward the bed and am just pulling back the blanket and getting ready to crawl in beside him when two rather shocking things happen simultaneously. As he attempts to unzip his pants under the comforter, David manages to get his skin caught in his zipper. His tortured scream coincides precisely with my mother’s horrified gasp as she ignores my sign (more likely she has been motivated by it) and opens the door to find me climbing under the covers with the screaming boy whose protruding little penis is stuck half-in, half-out of his zipper.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” she screams. I jump away from the bed so quickly that I trip over my little plastic cash register on the carpet and cause it’s “sale” bell to ring as the cash drawer pops open.

“Nothing,” David and I reply, in guilty unison.

Then David begins to cry. I look on in horror.

“Oh, my God,” my mother says, and I know we’re in trouble because my mother, daughter of a Baptist Sunday School teacher, never, ever takes the Lord’s name in vain.

“Tammy, go into the living room. We’ll talk about this later.”

I nod my head and back out of the room, listening to my mother as she tries to calm David, now a patient for real, as he un-lodges the zipper. I hear a single, pathetic yelp, and my mother tells David to get himself properly dressed and put his shoes on. Playtime is over.

My mother claims not to remember the next part of the story, but I recall an angry march to David’s apartment door. As David sulks his way past his father, my mother, much to my mortification, calmly explains that she doesn’t think the play visits are such a great idea anymore. She tells him what has happened. I stare at my shoes and feel naked. I don’t know what
kind of reaction she expects to get from David’s father, but he seems un-phased. In fact, he appears to be trying to hold back laughter. My mother is outraged.

On the walk back to our apartment, she goes on about how the apple clearly doesn’t fall very far from the tree. I listen quietly and am relieved that her wrath is directed at someone other than me. I know that sooner or later there will be an uncomfortable talk and that I’ll have to fess up to being less than innocent. I am incapable of lying effectively to my mother, who stares me down until I blink in shame.

Back home, I wait in my room as instructed, anticipating with dread the embarrassing conversation I know is coming. But it never comes. My mother goes back to cleaning and the next time we will speak of the event—laughing and giddy through our tears—I am in my twenties, living in New York City. And guilty of so, so much more.
One day, David and I are playing together on the playground when his father approaches us, followed by a tousled-looking blond girl about my size.

“David, did you tell Tammy about Dawn yet?” his father asks. He opens the chain link gate and walks through with the little girl.

“No, I forgot,” David says, now sullen.

“Hi!” says the little girl, waving at me.

“Hi,” I respond, looking from David to the girl and then back again because I am shocked at how much she looks like him.

“This is my twin sister,” David shrugs.

My mouth hangs open. There are two of them—just alike except for the dress, brown suede go-go boots and Sandy Duncan pixie haircut. She is pretty, but there is nothing girlie about her—except in contrast to her brother.

David’s father explains that when he and his wife separated earlier in the summer, each of them had kept one half of the family, but now they are getting back together, so Dawn will be living here from now on.
I stare at the pixie, and she smiles at me with an open, friendly expression that appears to carry no agenda and expects nothing in return. In an instant David is replaced by my new best friend, Dawn.

We become a threesome. We travel together to day care, movies and shopping excursions. We’re one unit. When I sleep over at Dawn and David’s, we play with “Dawn” dolls—shorter, cuter versions of Barbies that are sold with mod, space-age plastic houses, tiny go-go boots and rubber clothing in hip fashions. David plays along beside us and runs over our Dawn doll heads with Tonka trucks or bright yellow tractors. We incorporate the violent gestures into the story and rush our Dawns to the hospital—underneath the molded plastic white dining room table.

The three of us play at one apartment or the other all summer long and into the new school year. Our parents are free from hindrance on alternating evenings—an arrangement that pleases everyone. When the twins sleep over at my apartment, Dawn and I bathe together and sleep snuggled tightly in my sagging twin, its springs long since sprung and useless from repeated attempts to turn my mattress into a trampoline. David sleeps below and beside, in the trundle that refuses to stay the upright position.

We dangle our toes over his restless form, tickling or kicking him until he stops laughing and says, “Cut it out!” Then Dawn and I take turns tickling each other’s backs and shoulders. We draw letters and try to guess what secret message is written in goose bumps. We argue over who will go first, since going last means being able to give in to the comfort of being gently touched and following the sensation into a tranquil sleep.
Months go by this way. My every sentence begins with, “Dawn and David said” or “Dawn and David are going…” One night, as we play underneath the round plastic dining table at their apartment, we try to ignore the sound of loud arguing in the adjoining living room. We concentrate on our plot and speak our made-up lines more loudly. The parents’ muffled voices become tense as they take their disagreement into the apartment’s single bedroom and further out of earshot of the three of us. The door closes, and the voices continue, their uneven pitches rising and falling in volume until we hear a series of staccato grunts and shrieks, then the sound of the door hitting the wall as it is pushed open with angry force. We continue to make our dolls move, but we stop the dialogue as the angry voices intrude upon our play, consuming the air that would carry our own sounds.

Whatever they are fighting about is so beyond my comprehension that they might as well be speaking another language. But they are both in a frenzy now—violent and filled with righteous fury. David’s father slams his hand against the wall to punctuate the end of a rant, and his mother grabs her keys and the brown suede shoulder bag on the table above us and hurls a string of obscenities at David’s father as she exits the apartment and slams the door.

We lie on our bellies on the floor, frozen. We hold our dolls upright with sweaty palms, still facing one another, their life-play paused. The real Dawn begins to cry. Her father tries to act like it’s no big deal and assures her her mommy will be back soon—that she has only gone to get groceries. He calls my mother to explain that perhaps she should pick me up now.

On Monday, David waits alone at the school bus stop. He tells me his sister has gone on a vacation with his mother, but they’ll be back soon. He looks lost. He doesn’t want to talk about it anymore, he tells me, when I ask him questions he cannot answer.
I am in third grade, and I know no one in my class at the huge new school. Each morning until now, Dawn and David and I have arrived on the bus and waved at each other as we went our separate ways in the hall. This morning, David walks away without looking back at me, and I wander into the fluorescent bright classroom to a roomful of strangers, disoriented.

The teacher hands us paperwork that we are supposed to fill out—simple forms asking for vital information such as Mother, Father, Home Address, and a reminder that there are parent/teacher conferences coming up soon. There is a space for two signatures at the bottom—one for my mother, one for my father—and a group of times to choose from. There is an early pick-up sheet, with a space for the name of the parent who will be picking me up on the day of the conference—a Friday in early November. There is a list of school-related events that the parents are invited to attend, and I see that “Father/Daughter” day is one of them, as is “Family Festival.”

I start to fill out the forms with my dull pencil, but I get the address wrong at first—substituting the address I had so aptly memorized at Tally Ho before moving to Country Club Village over the summer. I use my fat pencil’s eraser to remove the mistake, but the rubber is broken, and I end up with an ugly gray smudge across the space where I am supposed to write. Now I cannot remember my new address. I wonder if I ever knew it or if my mommy just forgot to tell me about this one. I know my father’s address, 10834 Radford Lane, Parkglen, but this isn’t where I live. I become anxious thinking about how my father will not be around for the “Father/Daughter” day, and I wonder if the Friday early pick-up day falls on the every—or the “other”—weekend I will spend with my dad. I don’t think my father has ever attended a school conference before, and I am not sure if I should hand back my form with the blank space or attempt to write in the explanation—that my parents are divorced and that my father lives across
town, with my step-mother and my new half-sister. I know that my father will not come to the “Family Festival” because he has a new family now. Since there are no other nearby relatives that would be interested, I figure my mother and I will probably end up skipping it, too.

The other kids are handing their papers back or folding them into their school satchels to bring home to their parents. I am sitting with my head in my hands, looking at the gray smudge on the paper and am at a loss as to what to do. I wonder if Dawn will still go to my school and if she and David and their parents will be at “Family Day.” My stomach and head begin to ache. I leave the forms on the desk and ask the teacher for the wooden hall pass so that I can go visit the nurse’s office. I want to go home.
Amazing Grace and the Lemonade Stand

School is out, and during the week I have a new babysitter—a born again Christian woman who asks me and the two younger children she looks after if we have taken the Lord into our hearts, if we are “saved.” She explains how no one can enter the pearly gates of Heaven without first accepting Jesus Christ and asking for forgiveness for our sins. We listen gravely and agree to accept Him as our Savior. We ask her how. She tells us it’s the simplest thing in the world, that all we have to do is say, “Lord Jesus, come into my heart, and save me. Forgive me for all my sins, and bless me with your love and light.”

She shows us how to kneel and place the palms of our hands together, pointing them toward Heaven. We each, in turn, assume the proper posture and repeat the words she has taught us—opening one closed eye to look at her when we need help repeating the phrase.

“That’s it!” she cries, clapping her hands together. “You’re saved. And you belong to Jesus now. You belong to the Lord.”

I walk around feeling different for a day or two and try my best to be good, even though I know now that no matter what I do, Heaven will not be denied me when I die. I am saved from my sins—no matter what they are, even though I only go to church when I’m visiting my grandma, which isn’t very often anymore.

One sunny afternoon, the other little girl at the babysitter’s and I set up a lemonade stand by the side of the road. We have a TV tray with paper cups and a pitcher of lukewarm lemonade.
We have scratched out a sign on the back of a cardboard box to tell people how much our lemonade cost—25 cents.

Because we’ve set up beside the apartment complex access road and not by the main highway, we stand in the heat for a long time before anyone stops. When we finally see a dull green Buick slow down to look at our stand, we wave it over, excitedly. As the car rolls to a stop in front of us, the chubby balding man in the driver’s seat smiles and says, “Howdy, gals!”

We say, “Howdy!” back to him, and he asks us how much for a cup of lemonade, even though it says how much right there on the sign.

“It’s only a quarter,” I say, swatting a gnat away from my sweaty face with one hand and twisting at the end of my left pigtail with the other.

“Only a quarter?” he laughs, and I see his belly shake like pudding under his perspiration-stained short-sleeved, button-down shirt. “Well, then. That’s a bargain! I’ll take me a cup of lemonade.”

He reaches into his pants pocket and hands me the quarter as far as he can reach, and I lean into the car to take it from him the rest of the way. He has all the windows down, but the inside of the car is an oven, and I can see why he’d need to stop for a refreshing beverage—even if the ice melted an hour ago.

His hand is sweaty, and he smells funny.

I turn and hand the quarter to my partner, who has already poured the drink, which irritates me just a little bit because that’s the fun part. She hands me the paper cup, and I carefully bend back over the open passenger window to hand it to the smelly fat man with the
sweaty hands. He takes the cup and laughs a raspy laugh. He says, “Why, thank you, little ladies. Y’all have a good day, now.” He takes a sip then puts his car into gear and drives away, as my little friend and I, both wearing bright floral koolots, stand in shock on the curb. We look at each other to see if what we had seen was real or just imagined. Our mouths hang open, and our hands reflexively go up to cover them as we make eye contact and start to giggle and scream because we had both been witness to the man’s erect penis, poking out of his open zipper.

We stop laughing and begin to cry. We abandon the stand and run as fast as our flip flopped feet will carry us across the parking lot and up the concrete steps to the babysitter’s apartment, where we tell her what has occurred. Her face turns pale. She hugs the two of us to her bosom, then cups our chins in her hands and looks back and forth, into our eyes. She makes a couple of phone calls, repeating our tale to the police and then to her boyfriend. When she hangs up, she tells us we are not to leave the apartment again unescorted — ever. We swear our obedience, but we start to cry again as we realize that now we’ll be prisoners for the rest of the summer because the babysitter never leaves her apartment during the day.

When our moms come to pick us up, the sitter doesn’t mention the event, which I, at least, have replayed in my mind for the better part of the afternoon. Though I have done nothing wrong, somehow I feel guilty, so I decide not to mention it to my mother at all.

When I’m alone, I think about what happened. I replay the event in daydreams, altering the memory and replacing the ending to one more satisfying, where I get a much better look at the stiff pink phallus as he takes a sip of lemonade. Along with my arousal, there is a deep sense of shame and confusion. I sense damage. At seven, I know nothing of abductions or pedophiles. But I am beginning to understand that people—not just my grandfather, but all people—feel an
urge between their legs—“down there,”—and that it’s something they don’t talk about without whispering.

I am terrified that the man will return, but at the same time, I kind of want to get a better look at the thing that was sticking out of his pants—the thing that was not saggy and limp, not tiny and shy, but large, stiff and mushroom-shaped. I just want a better look. I’m pretty sure it’s a sin to want to see, but I am comforted because I know that I am forgiven. I am saved.
On the Move

The summer Dawn and David move away, I become aware, for the first time, that the world is bigger than Texas. I start planning my future move the first time I see a postcard photograph of the New York City skyline at night.

My mother has taken in a stray—not the stray cat I found wandering the asphalt parking lot behind our building, meowing meekly and looking pathetic and skinny in his dirty calico coat. I felt compelled to carry him up the stairs and pour a cup of milk in a bowl that I left outside our apartment door just for him. My mother was furious when she saw the patchy-looking cat drinking out of one of our cereal bowls at our front door. She told me to go and wash my hands right away because God knows what kind of diseases the mangy-looking thing was carrying. Besides, she said, lifting the bowl and nudging the cat away with her toe, cats freaked her out.

We did not adopt the mangy kitten, but when I bring home a teenaged girl one afternoon, my mother takes her under wing. Patty has been living with her boyfriend in an apartment across the hall from us. One day, lured by the sounds of Simon and Garfunkel coming from the open door, I stop to poke my head inside the apartment and see several brightly lit aquariums filled with tropical fish. Staring at their lazy motion, I remain there, memorized by the music and the fish until I hear the sound of muffled crying coming from the bedroom. I am about to back out of the doorway when a blue-jeaned blonde with a red nose and Kleenex in her hand walks into the living room and sees me.
“Do you like fish?” she asks, smiling and motioning me inside the apartment. “It’s okay. You can look. Come on in.”

“What’s your name?” I ask. She is pretty—with curly hair that falls past her shoulders. She wears faded denim hip-huggers with colorful patches sewn over the torn places, and her cotton midriff blouse leaves her flat tummy and belly button exposed. Though a bit bloodshot from crying, her eyes are sky blue and bear no trace of the liner, shadow, mascara and fake lashes that my mom and all the other grownup ladies I knew wear.

“Patty,” she says, smiling and sniffing a bit.

I look around the apartment—much like the one that I share with my mother, but without a vaulted ceiling and only one bedroom in this one. In place of doors, Patty’s place has long strings of colorful beads hanging from the door frames. The furniture is low to the ground and cheap—a couple of vinyl beanbag chairs, a coffee table made from packing crates and a stereo shelf made from the missing bedroom door. There are posters taped to the walls—psychedelic patterns and rainbow colors on black velvet.

“Why are you crying?” I ask.

Patty tells me she is fine but just a little upset because she has had an argument with her stupid boyfriend and is a little homesick for New York, her dad and her family.

I invite her back to my apartment and tell her my mom will be her friend. I take her by the hand and lead her, protesting meekly, across the hall, where I call my mother from the open doorway.
Despite the awkward introduction, or perhaps because of it, Patty, who is little more than a teenager and probably a runaway, becomes my mother’s confident. Taking her under wing, my mother encourages Patty to write to her folks in New York, and while she waits for an answer, which eventually comes in the form of a postcard—the first picture I have ever seen of the city, Patty becomes my adopted big sister, babysitting me when my mother goes out, swimming with me in the pool), and allowing me to call her, “Sis” in front of the other kids in the complex, even though we are lying to everyone. She is my co-conspirator, a bridge between my mother’s “Jackie-O” generation and my own, the “Rhoda” to my mom’s “Mary.”

Patty soon returns to her boyfriend across the hall and eventually goes back home to New York City. Not long after she disappears from our lives, my mom and I are on the move again—a state I’ve begun to, if not exactly enjoy, at least anticipate as the “normal” way of life. To this day, the idea of permanence makes me feel panicky and trapped, and when circumstance or budget prohibits an actual move, I am prone to re-arranging furniture in the middle of the night or tearing down plaster walls or peeling wallpaper with my bare hands, just to expose whatever is underneath.

I come home from school one day to find several wardrobe boxes scattered throughout the apartment, which has already been emptied of our rented furniture. The box in my bedroom is taller than me by a head, and my mother tells me to toss whatever I want to keep inside—stuffed animals, toys, a favorite blanket, my pillow, the little Cinderella wooden box purse that my grandmother gave me that had three pennies inside (for good luck), clothing that still fits—but that I should leave behind anything I don’t really care about or need.

“You need to get rid of some of that clutter,” she says. “Why bring the mess with you?”
I panic inside. What my mother considers “clutter” is often something I hold dear—my giant, faded pink lion, for instance, its broken neck floppy with compacted stuffing from years of being bent into awkward shapes to fit into boxes, the tops of closets or shoved underneath a bed. I’d had the lion for as long as I can remember. He appears beside me, towering above me, in faded black and white Polaroids, where I am diapered and smiling as I toddle my way around the ottoman. She threw it in the dumpster without a word one day while cleaning my room. I came in from playing and found a freshly vacuumed, perfectly orderly, sun-drenched space that I did not recognize in place of my room.

This time, my mother lets me choose what to keep and what to leave behind.

She tells me our new apartment is gorgeous, and I will love it. As I mechanically move about my bedroom lifting and tossing my most familiar belongings into the open cardboard flaps, my mother darts back and forth from kitchen, to living room, up the staircase to her bedroom, talking all the while in a joyful voice about the perfect new apartment complex that looks like a cross between Old New Orleans and Florence.

“Oh, wait until you see,” she sings, “your room has a little balcony with real wooden shutters! And there are vines covering the walls outside and birds singing in the vines! There’s even a little patio out back—a private little yard. We can get a dog!”

I perk up at the thought of having a pet, and the balcony sounds nice, too. I begin to move more quickly, throwing sheets, pillow cases, toys, books and other random items into the box, which fills up quickly. My mother caps the top by folding and taping the four cardboard flaps, and the remainder of items in the room are gathered into a heap and tossed into the dumpster behind the building.
I barely have time to register the disappearance of one world before I am introduced to the next. The boxes are left behind for the movers who, my mother assures me, already know where to take the remainder of our things. We push the dirty white convertible top down, slam the car doors, gun the engine a few times and back out of Country Club Village for good. My mother lights a Marlboro and punches the radio dial. We navigate the Houston traffic listening to Helen Reddy singing, “I am Woman.” I hang my head out the window and watch telephone poles speed by, as the hot wind slaps my face and hair. She turns up the volume and sings along. Questions and explanations about where we are going and why we are leaving are on hold for as long as the radio plays.
Trafalgar West

We turn off the urban strip into a tranquil avenue, divided in half by a lush median strip planted with spruce and bougainvillea. The complex is unlike any we’ve lived in so far. Instead of a series of identical rectangle boxes with matching concrete walkways and stairwells surrounding a kidney-shaped pool, Trafalgar West looks more like a movie set. Each unit of townhouse-style apartments is architecturally unique from the others, even if their facades are connected underneath the fake plaster. Painted in dirty pastel pinks, blues and grays, the outer walls of the buildings look aged. Forest green shutters adorn the front windows and tiny little wooden balconies with French doors jut out from the upper floors. Instead of blacktop driveways and corrugated tin-covered parking spaces, there are separate driveways leading to vine-covered, trellised private patios.

My mother drives the length of the avenue so I can see the complex in its entirety before I see our unit. We pass the French-looking unit and the facade beside it, which is painted gray, with tangled vines that reach to the second story windows. There is an imposing archway over an inner courtyard where visitors enter. The next building is made of pink brick, with bright yellow doors and window casings. It has several tall trees in front of a tiny lawn, and lacy pink ironwork balconies grace its second and third story landings. Across the avenue, equally diverse units, each contoured and colored to represent the look of a different European region, give the complex an artsy appearance. In city where anything more than 20 years old is torn down to make room for the new, Trafalgar West is an oasis of stagecraft, designed to give its residents the illusion of history.
Behind a tall picketed black iron fence at the end of the cul-de-sac, there is a large swimming pool surrounded by a mechanically operated rocky waterfall that spills into the shallow end. The pool area is landscaped with rocks and three tiers of sun-bathing areas, giving the whole thing the appearance of a Hollywood set designer’s idea of a natural, woodsy look. Realistic or not, it looks good enough for me.

We park in our space behind the patio, but my mother wants me to enter the apartment—number 8—from the front entrance so that I can “get the whole effect,” so we circle around the building and make our entrance from the front road. We walk through the cobblestoned courtyard and follow a winding path past a weeping willow and are serenaded by a cacophony of noisy birds.

There are 10 apartments in our unit, each with its own uniquely colored, shrub-flanked doorway. Ours is yellow, with a large knocker on the front. My mother unlocks the door and presents me with my own key—a blue metallic hardware store copy that I will wear around my neck on a chain. I am almost eight years old, and since my mother’s new secretarial job is going to be right down the road, she’ll be able to get home by 5:30, so it’s silly to pay for childcare for only two hours every day. Starting with the new school year, I’ll be on my own from 3-5:30, and I’ll have to let myself in and entertain myself until she gets home.

The two-story apartment is somewhat smaller than our last one, but there is a sliding glass door to a private patio. My mother’s room has a Master Bath with a shower and “his and her” sinks connected by a fake marble vanity. There is a large walk-in closet, as well.
My room is right next door to hers and, it, too, has a private bathroom and a walk-in closet. The big selling point, my mother announces, with a theatrical “Carol Merill” flourish, are the French doors that open onto my own tiny, private balcony.

I am thrilled—until I actually walk outside to find that the romantic European illusion ends the second one walks through the French doors. The balcony has poured concrete floors and looks out over a chain-link fence that separates the narrow alley way below from the parking lot of the unit next door. Even if the space was large enough for a chair, my view would be ugly cars pulling in and out of their assigned spaces, each one marked in bright day-glo yellow numbers. Not only that—the second floor balconies are so closely spaced together that one would be forced into awkward conversation with anyone who was out on the adjoining balconies at the same time.

Still, it is a balcony, sort of. And it is my own.

The new apartment, it turns out, comes with a new school. In my old district, I am a third of the way through third grade. Inexplicably, my mother decides to put me into second grade at Briargrove Elementary—a move which, along with joining the class in the middle of the school year—brands me as a “retard” when my clearly not thinking right new teacher announces to my new classmates that I have already been in third grade, but now I am joining their second grade class.

At recess, the kids stand around at recess unsupervised, with nothing to do. They form predictable clumps—nicely dressed little girls in one tight circle, laughing and whispering, while girls with ugly, scuffed brown shoes like mine form a smaller circle, silent, awkward, and unsure
of what to say to one another. The boys chase and fall and tumble in heaps on the narrow strip of grass beside the blacktop.

After a painful silence, a freckle-spattered orange-headed little girl to my immediate left makes an attempt at conversation with the me.

“How come you’re only in second grade now?” she asks.

Happy to be addressed by the friendly face, I tell her my mother said it’s because I was shorter than the rest of the kids in third grade because I started Kindergarten early. Since we were moving, she took the opportunity to correct the error in judgment which, she said, had been bothering her all along. I don’t say that I am not as “mature” as the other kids, which means my behavior sucks. I bite. I scratch. I talk out of turn, pull teeth in the classroom, bleed on my workbook, don’t pay attention to the teacher, never do my homework assignments and am not comfortable with my fellow students. These are the real reasons I belong in second grade, not third.

I open my mouth to convey what little I know about my situation, but I am interrupted before I can begin my sentence. One of the pretty girls from the other group has scurried over to the freckle-faced girl to whisper in her ear. I close my mouth and watch the expression on the freckle-faced girl’s face change when she hears what the pretty girl has to say. Everyone hears what she has to say because she whispers theatrically, with her hand only partially in front of her mouth as she leans in toward the orange-headed girl’s little ear.

“Don’t talk to her,” she says. “She’s retarded!”
She pulls the girl away by the elbow as she speaks, and I see the freckle-faced girl’s eyes widen, realizing her social error. She looks sad. She feels sorry for the poor little retarded girl because nobody is allowed to play with her. I look at my ugly shoes then concentrate on the remnants of a chalk hopscotch board, willing myself not to cry in front of the new classmates. What had been several small circles is now one large circle of girls, united in otherness. They are the ones who are not retarded, and in case it is catching, they don’t come anywhere near the one who is.

Everything makes sense to me now—why Diane moved up, and I didn’t, why I have no friends in school. And my poor mother, all these years, not wanting to tell me that I am retarded—not wanting me to feel different than the others. Of course, I reason, when one is retarded, no one actually tells them they are retarded—they just are. That must be why I was put back a grade. Everything makes perfect sense to me in light of this new information, and I no longer feel slighted by the rejection of my classmates. After all, it makes sense that they would want to play with kids who are smart—not dumb kids, like me.

I walk toward the softball field and find a tree to stand under. I look up at it, wishing its leaves would fall so I would have a nice, soft place to sit beneath the limbs. I’m old enough to know now that the trees cannot be my friends, but I still feel less alone standing beneath one/

My unit at Trafalgar West is filled with kids my age, and they are equally strange, transient and social misfits, like me. Across the courtyard, a little boy named “Mike” has received a drum set for Christmas. His big brother, two years older, listens to *Jackson 5* albums and *The Osmond Brothers*. Their apartment is the only one with a full-sized terrace, and in the
afternoons, many of the children from the unit end up at Mike’s house, pretending to play instruments while he bangs his drums in beat to, “A,B,C” and other tunes. We carry his little portable record player as far as the electric plug will allow out onto the terrace, and while his live-in Mexican maid/nanny cooks beans and watches soap operas downstairs, we jam on the terrace until our mothers call us inside.

Along with Mike and his brother, there are two little girls across the courtyard—one to the right, another to the left of my apartment. I bond first with Shelly. Her parents are in the midst of a contentious divorce, and whenever Shelly and I take walks together outside our unit, to the pool or down the avenue, she spends a lot of time ducking behind bushes.

“That looks like his car!” she’ll scream, dragging me with her into a hedge. “My daddy told my momma he’d snatch me up and take me away where she’d never even see me again,” she warns, whispering as we lay flat and still as can be on the broken mulch.

When I spend the night at Shelly’s apartment, we lick jawbreakers from Ferrell’s, the ice cream parlor/candy shoppe at the mall. They start out psychedelic, with a grainy surface the size of a baseball, but by mid-winter, mine is no bigger than a pool-ball, almost completely white and licked smooth into the shape of a half-moon. Inside, like the rings of a tree, you can see faint pinks, greens, blues and grays marking the various stages of color and flavor I’ve already licked through. In its center is a little crunchy candy ball, packed with color and flavor, but I rarely make it all the way to the center of a Ferrell’s jawbreaker.

Shelly has candy cotton red curly hair that stands up no matter what style she wears it — even her pony-tails are puffy. Her skin is ghostly-white, and her eyes are an uncomfortably light blue—so light, they don’t look completely human.
My mother thinks Shelly’s mother is “strange” and secretive, so she is trying to get to know her better one day by taking us all on a trip to the Galleria—the brand new shopping mall with the giant ice-skating rink in the center. We are getting into my mom’s car, and Shelly’s mom and my mom and I have are inside already. I lean over so that Shelly can climb across me from my mom’s side of the car, since the passenger side back door doesn’t work right. There is a paper bag on the floor at my feet, and Shelly steps on it and then loses her balance then tries to right herself with her left hand. All of a sudden, she screams and pushes herself past me and back out of the car door.

I blink in confusion. My mother has already started the car, and Shelly’s mother yells at Shelly to get back in. There is a moment where everything seems to stop, and I watch in fascination as a pulsating stream of bright blue blood pours out of the artery in Shelly’s wrist, turning bright red as it hits the air.

“Oh. My. God!” screams Shelly’s mother, and my mother gasps and begins to beat the air with both her hands.

“What on Earth? What on Earth?” She can’t imagine—none of us can—how this horror has descended upon us in the instant between getting into the car and driving away to our shopping trip. Shelly begins to scream as she watches the river of blood that won’t slow, won’t stop draining, gushing out of her tiny arm.

“Shelly! Shelly, get in!” her mother screams.

I pull her inside, and my mother begins backing out of the parking space before we have even closed the door. Now we are running lights, honking the horn, speeding in the direction of the nearest emergency room. Shelly’s mother screams my mother through each navigation, each
near miss, all the while holding the bleeding arm up as high as she can, while Shelly leans across the seat divider, as white, literally, as the strip of skirt her mom has torn off to tie above the wound.

“Is she going to die?” I ask.

“Shut up!” her mother screams, and I can tell from the look on my mother’s face in the rearview mirror that this woman is never going to be her friend.

“What did she cut herself on?” my mother wants to know. I lean down to find out. A single, jagged piece of clear glass pokes out of the brown paper bag at my feet.

“There was something glass in the bag here,” I say.

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake,” says my mom and immediately begins to cry because she realizes the whole episode has been her fault. She’d bought some glasses at Pier One and forgot to remove them from the car.

Shelly’s mother turns her fury on the hysterical driver, admonishing her for leaving glass in the backseat of the car when there are small children riding here. My mother yells back at her that she hadn’t planned to be carrying a car full of people shopping today, and she is sorry, but accidents do happen, and why doesn’t she just shut up and comfort her daughter until we get to the hospital instead of yelling at everyone and making us all more miserable than we already are.

Shelly stops crying and puts her head down. Not hearing her cry is worse than all the screams and angry voices, and nobody speaks at all until we get to the hospital.

I wait on a blue plastic chair nailed to the wall while the ER doctor stitches up Shelly’s arm, making funny jokes that have her laughing moments after we were all pretty sure she was
going to die. Within about 15 minutes, the whole episode is over, and Shelly comes out of the
ER with a large white bandage on her arm, a lollypop in her mouth and the cute doctor by her
side, rubbing the back of her neck with one hand.

He gives her mother a prescription for pain pills and tells her how to care for the wound
over the next few days and when to bring her back to have the stitches taken out. That’s it. Then,
we’re all back in my mother’s car, except the paper bag is gone now, and Shelly’s bandaged arm
is propped between us on the pull-down cushion. My mom and Shelly’s mom laugh about how
scared we all were and replay the ride to the ER as if it had been a scene in a slapstick comedy.
Everyone is relieved, jovial. But we don’t head to the mall. We go home. And within a week or
two, Shelly and her mother are gone without a word to anyone. I guess it has something to do
with her dad—perhaps a call from the hospital, I don’t know. Or, maybe her mother is trying to
stay one step ahead of the angel of death. Who knows? One day, her apartment door is open, but
no one is inside. A few days later, the apartment is occupied by someone else. I knock on the
door to see if they have any kids, but they don’t.

The little girl who lives on the other side of my apartment is grossly overweight, with
pasty white skin and short, oily hair. Her name is Carol, and her mother doesn’t allow her to do
much. We never play outside. Instead, we spend a great deal of time playing on the floor of her
bedroom with Barbie dolls. On days when I have to come home and let myself into my
apartment, Carol comes over to my place, and we spend hours tape recording our voices and
playing them back on fast forward. We make up stories and songs and create characters and act
out little “radio” dramas. Then we play them back over and over, enamored by the sounds of our
own voices.
Carol has not been a part of Mike’s little band and doesn’t really know the other kids at Trafalgar West very well, but in Shelly’s absence, she becomes my best friend. I love the hours we spend on the floor of her pink room or sitting at my mother’s Spanish-style oak dining table, punching the keys on the tape recorder. When we move away from Trafalgar West, I forget to tell her goodbye.
For a time after my mother leaves him and before his illness begins to chip away at the new mosaic he works so courageously to build, my father is happy. He’s been married to my step-mother for a couple of years, and they are living in a newly constructed gray brick home in Parkglen—a subdivision near Sugarland, just on the outskirt of Houston. The house is one of several models that make up the neighborhood. There are hundreds of them, just alike, sprinkled ad hoc throughout the curvy, side-walked cul-de-sacs and patchwork front yards that wind their way around the subdivision. Parkglen is the working man’s idea of the American Dream. It is made up of dozens of bull-dozed, cleared, developed and newly-re-seeded lots that have been plopped out of nowhere into the middle of weedy fields beside the back highways of what has previously been a sleepy sugar-manufacturing community. Soon, the area will be swallowed up by Houston proper and, like the rest of the city, will be well-manicured and surrounded by shopping malls with expensive stores, chain restaurants, bars and multiplex cinemas. Newly built freeways will provide easy access to downtown commuters and suburban shoppers. The windy, deserted country roads we travel on the way to and from the house will be abandoned.

Now, thought, Parkglen and nearby Sugarland are considered the “sticks.” Newly arrived immigrant families from Mexico crowd three generations into small three-bedroom homes. They live next door to newlyweds just starting out—young couples who can’t afford to live in already established areas of town. Parkglen offers the suburban promise—a two car garage, fenced back yard, community pool, tiny green lawns next to curbed sidewalks—to folks like my dad. It is where a divorced accountant making regular child support payments to his ex-wife can give his
new bride, sixteen years his junior, a good life as they started a family together. It is a place for new beginnings.

In Parkglen, my father parks his beige Vega in the driveway and turns the garage into a workshop with an entire wall of tools hanging from hooks. The space smells like paint and sawdust, and the metal garage door stays open throughout the day every weekend, as my father buzz cuts, sands, whistles and sips cold beer from a can. He builds himself a pull-down train city that can be lifted back into a vertical position against the wall when he needs the floor-space and sawhorses for other projects. Mostly, though, the giant plywood platform rests across the supports, its tiny cities, train depots, tracks, trains, cars, mountains, shops and brightly painted people lit by dozens of teensy electric lights when my father plugs the circuits into an electrical strip that attaches to the plug on the wall by the kitchen door.

This is my dad’s playroom, and we spend long hours here during my twice a month weekend visits, happily playing with the train set’s switches and destinations. My step-mother brings him giant plastic tumblers filled with sweet iced-tea and rubs his neck and shoulders while he lays plastic tracks.

Inside, she pads around the house in cotton “footies,” short socks with little colored yarn balls on each heel. Her waist-length brown hair is full of frizz and untamed curls, and she wears it loose, unlike my mother, who carefully sets her hair in large plastic curlers twice a week, clips her bangs against her forehead with clippies and sit under the dome of a baby blue plastic hair dryer for the better part of an evening reading a magazine or turning the volume up on her black and white television as thousands of tiny hot air jets bake the Dipity Doo’s style into place. For
special occasions—a date, for instance, my mother will top her “do” with one of several ready-styled falls that she keeps on creepy, faceless Styrofoam heads on her dresser.

Pam wears gold, wire-rimmed circle glasses like John Denver. Her almond-shaped, blue-green eyes are topped with just a hint of frosted gray eye-shadow, her lashes combed with light brown mascara that ball up a bit on the ends, giving them a doe-like softness. My mother wears brightly colored polyester baby doll dresses with accordion pleats. She sleeps in nylon nightgowns, her bangs scotch-taped against her head so they won’t stick out in the morning. Pam dresses in cotton peasant garb, blue jeans and halter tops. She sleeps in the nude and is unashamed of her body, walking around the house in nothing but her footies. Her feet are chronically cold, so she wears the socks to bed, but nothing else. Her breasts are heavy and full. Her torso is long, her legs shapely and pale. She is tapered with curves from her waist to her wide hips, from her round bottom to her freckled thighs. She is as exotic an adult as I have ever known. She is, in fact, not an adult at all, but still a teenager—half a generation between my mother and me.

I have my own bedroom at the Parkglen house, decorated with Pam’s childhood bedroom set—a twin mattress and wooden frame with a quilted, coppery bedspread that scratches my chin when I pull it over myself at night. There is a matching wooden dresser, bedside table, desk and mirror that fit neatly into the corner of the room. At night, my father and Pam take turns telling me stories or reading to me at bedtime. Pam tucks me in, pulls the desk chair to the bedside and reads from her dog-eared copy of The Hobbit or The Lord of the Rings, stopping to explain words or answer questions about the text when asked, which is often. The stories, rather than having the intended effect of lulling me to sleep, instead excite me, and I sit up to listen, my heart racing with adventure, until, exasperated and sleepy, she puts the book down on the bedside
table and sing songs to calm me down. Her voice is soft and lullling, and her repertoire, unlike my mother’s Johnny Ray and Doris Day tunes, is drawn from 60s folk singers. She sings, “I Gave my Love a Cherry without a Stone,” and explains the confounding lyric to me musically, in the second verse, before I have a chance to interrupt the song to ask its meaning.

When it is my father’s turn to put me to bed, he sits beside me in the dark, puts his feet up on the edge of my covers and softly narrate one of several tales he’s spent his life perfecting—about how he and his twin brother once sneaked into “the old abandoned green house at the top of the hill,” in downtown Kirvin only to come across a glowing skull, lit from within by a candle, in an upstairs bedroom.

“Who knows how that candle had gotten there,” he says, “but surely whoever lit it was still inside of the house…”

I squeal in terror and delight as he inevitably ends the stories with his characters running from something chasing them—a shadow, a voice in the dark, telling them to “get out—NOW,” or, when chided by Pam that his daughter is never going to sleep now that he’s scared her half to death—he throws in an ending so silly that he and I both giggle for the next half hour from our bedrooms’ open doors, tiny fits of laughter that travel across the den, from one bedroom to the next, like a goodnight kiss that returns again and again in the dark, quiet house.

The silly endings usually go something like, “and then we ran down the staircase, screaming towards the front door, as the skull followed us down the stairs, c-lump, c-lump, clump. We ran all the way back home, just knowing that skull was following us, and when we finally got to our front door, guess what we saw on the front porch, waiting for us? Yep. There it was—lit up inside and smiling at us, while our granddaddy and grandma sat two feet behind it in
rockers, laughing their heads off at the way they had scared the doody out of your ol’ Uncle Don and me. We like to never live that one down, and let me tell you, that was the last time either one of us ever sneaked out again. We knew we’d been had, and we’d learned our lesson.

“Still, we never could quite figure out why—,” and he’ll add some cryptic ending to the silly tale, just to keep the suspense going, for next time we visit “the old green house at the top of the hill.” Then, he sings me a song in his always slightly off-tune, but lovely voice. He sings, “One Hundred Miles Away from Home,” or “Beautiful, Beautiful Brown Eyes,” and the sadness in his voice, combined with the haunting melodies, sends me drifting somewhere in between sleep and consciousness, until I picture my daddy and Uncle Don running in terror from the old green house and his grandparent’s skull candle, and I start to giggle all over again.

Eventually, my daddy gives up on getting me to sleep and kisses me goodnight and leaves me there in the dark, scared, but giddy. I hear him laughing with Pam about my reaction to the stories as they snuggled up together in their bedroom with the open door, across the den.

At some point while he and Pam are living in Parkglen that my father purchases his first fishing boat—an aqua-blue and white Speed Queen that lives in the driveway, where my dad hoses it down and sponges its underbelly and sides lovingly every few weeks, whether it needs cleaning or not. It has a captain’s chair above the wheel that provides a clear view when my daddy steers it over the murky, branch-infested waters of Lake Travis or the Galveston Bay. My dad loves this boat. Once, on a sea-fishing trip, I catch a hammerhead shark by accident and cringe in terror while my uncle and my father scream and beat at the thrashing, fighting beast that refuses to be thrown back into the sea. When they finally manage to get the monstrosity over the side of the boat, they toast my first catch with an ice cold Coke from a red and white plastic
cooler. As the sun lowers across the muddy gulf waters, my daddy steers the boat back to shore, and we re-live the experience, tears of relieved laughter streaking our sunburned cheeks in the wind.

After a few years of making minimum monthly payments on the Sea Queen, my dad upgrades to a Bass boat with bench seats for the whole family. By this time, his new family has grown to include my half-sister, Angie, born when I was eight years-old, and my brother, Justin, who came along less than two years later.

My sister is born during one of my bi-monthly visits to Parkglen. My step-mother, having woken to contractions early Saturday morning, sits calmly, like a cross-legged, Buda, on the bathroom vanity, casually applying her makeup. She is naked, but for the little footies with the fuzzy balls on the ends. My father races in a panic about the house, packing a suitcase, making last-minute phone calls to the in-laws and my mother, warming up the car in the driveway. But Pam shows no signs of stress as she runs the lip gloss across her lips and blots them on a Kleenex.

Twelve hours later, I look through the hospital nursery glass at a tiny red-headed bean. I have a sister—for real, even if she is only a “half” sister. She is my blood, and she has bright red hair and teensy, shriveled up toes I can tickle.

My sister sleeps in a crib beside the bed in my father and Pam’s bedroom. Pam breastfeeds her in a cane-back rocking chair that used to belong to her grandmother. She lulls my sister to sleep with soft songs about cherries and love. I stand at the edge of the crib and look at her tiny pinched face and shriveled little feet, wondering how long it will take before she becomes a “real” sister— someone to play dolls with, ride bikes with, snuggle with under the blanket in my
twin bed when it is dark. I imagine giggling with my red-headed sis over the stories our daddy
tells us, long after the lights had gone out, when we are supposed to be sleeping. Something
about those little feet is irresistible to me, and I reach inside the crib to stroke the bottom of one,
tickling the soft, squishy toes until my sister squirms and coos. When my step-mother catches me
messing with the baby, she chastises me and threatens to tear up my hide if I wake her up. I
withdraw from the darkened room, unsatisfied at so little contact with this tiny person whose
arrival I’ve anticipated would mean so much more.

My father takes over my bedtime routine, and, forced to move beyond his limited “old
green house on the hill” repertoire, he begins fabricating elaborate fairy tales for me about a little
suburban girl who becomes a princess and moves to a huge castle, where she lives happily ever
after. If the princess tale doesn’t move me in the direction of sleep, he tells me funny made-up
stories about a pair of twin brothers who join the navy and leave their cowboy life on the range
to travel to big cities like San Francisco, where everyone they see is crazy and wears flowers in
their hair, or to New York City, where they meet a couple of nice-looking young women who
say they are “bunnies.” The anecdotes are usually just this side of “PG” rated and are always
funny. My father embellishes the stories at each telling, making the cowboy brothers even more
socially inept, country-bumpkin and naïve and the people they meet along the way more absurd
or big-city crazy than the last version he told.

“Daddy! Tell the one about the bunnies!” I beg, and he rolls his eyes like he’s tired of
that one or can’t believe I’d want to hear that old tired tale again. Then, he launcheds into the
middle of it, or says, “Well, there is something I forgot to tell you about them boys last time…”
and he describes how the silly cowboys didn’t even know what a Playboy bunny was when they
first heard about them and thought the girls they’d taken out were real bunnies, with tails under
their clothes and long, pointy ears hiding under their hats. The sillier the premise, the more I enjoy the stories. My father chuckles at his own tales, at the way I laugh when he tells me the stories. Soon, the stories go from being outlandish to just plain ridiculous. He wraps the whole thing up with an ending that has everybody confused about bunnies, the navy, cowboys, twins and the big city—there is a comedy of errors involving identities, the threat of getting lost and not getting back to the ship in time, a quick sprint to “get the Hell out of Dodge,” and the brothers’ last minute decision to leave the pretty bunnies and the big city, with all its insanity, behind, as they raced to catch their boat out of town. Their ultimate destination, of course, is “Home, home on the range,” and my father launches into the song in his slightly off-pitch, earnest way, which is my cue to close my eyes.

“Sing another song, Daddy,” I whisper, when he is done. “Sing the one about a hundred miles.”

And he breaks my heart with the mournful song. When my blue-eyed sister is born, though, my father retires my favorite bedtime tune, “Beautiful Brown Eyes” for good, along with its final lyric, “I’ll never love blue eyes again.”

He’d told my step-mother before he married her that he didn’t want to have more children because I might think he didn’t love me anymore. She quietly accepted the comment for what it probably was—a passing insecurity, born of the sadness of not being in my life as a full-time dad—and went right ahead and did what a young wife was inclined to do. After a year of marriage, when her first year’s prescription of birth control pills had run out, she’d turned to my father and said, “Well, I guess that’s that. The pills are all gone.”
And my father had looked at his young wife, knowing she was in it for good, believing things could be different this time, vowing to himself he’d make her happy, make her stay. Nine months later, he is relieved to see me cooing and singing to my little half-sister, Pam sitting on the sofa by my side, softly directing me to support the baby’s head and neck, to bounce her gently this way, hold her snugly to my chest, wrap her little toes in the blanket so she won’t get cold. The shoebox hidden behind the laundry basket in the closet perhaps remains closed for a while, the bottle inside unopened. For a while, anyway, my father must believe that happiness has finally come home to stay.
On Tuesdays in 1969, my mother drives me to acting lessons near the Astrodome after school. I am the youngest person in the class. I carry my heavy three-ring binder filled with breathing exercises and place it under my chair while I am guided through stretching and tongue twisters. The class takes place in a concrete bubbled space that is supposed to look like a miniature Astrodome. Celebrities like Howard Keel, Carol Lawrence and Sandy Duncan come through town in touring musicals, and their names appear in large block letters on the marquis just off the freeway.

We sit in velvet theatre chairs in the audience, while our instructors stand before us on the round stage, directing us to speak our words “trippingly on the tongue” and breathe from our diaphragms. I have wanted to be an actress since I was three and first saw The Sound of Music. But at seven years old, I am clueless in this class and merely show up each week carrying the heavy blue notebook. When I leave after two hours, my mother meets me in the lobby and asks me how it went. I shrug and wrap my arms tighter around the giant binder that promises to make me an actress, if only I could read the narrowly printed and badly Xeroxed text inside.

We drive a few exits down the freeway to Slenderama, where I am deposited in the childcare room, which is actually a cage with dirty white walls, a bright red carpet and metal bars. Me and the other children are locked inside this room no toys, furniture or coloring books—just walls, bars across the entrance, and a red carpet. We stare out of the bars as our mothers huff and puff on the treadmill or stand on a machine and wrap a thick belt around their waste that will jiggle their fat away. Like the kids in Hansel and Gretel, we wrap our skinny fingers around the
bars and watch as our mothers, in a reversal of the fairy tale, try to slim down. A bored blond attendant in a sun yellow shirt sits on a stool in the corner. She has a tiny alligator over her breast pocket and is in charge of opening and closing the barred gate whenever a parent comes to retrieve a child. Other than saying, “…five minutes later than the last time you asked me,” she doesn’t speak to us at all. She stares at the ceiling, pops her gum and listens to music through a single ear bud connected to her portable transistor radio.

The carpet smells like mildew, and I feel trapped and panicky as I watch my mother go through her work-out on the opposite side of the gate. A little boy in a dirty t-shirt tries to run up the walls. Another, younger, child, sits in the middle of the floor, cries for his mommy. No one tries to comfort him, and the jumping boy seems oblivious to the toddler as he makes his repeated trek back and forth from one wall to the other.

When her workout is done, my mother retrieves me from the cell. We head back to the apartment and stop at Burger King to pick up Whoppers, fries, Cokes and a colorful paper crown. At home, my mother constructs the crown to fit my head, and we eat from floral metal collapsible trays in front of the television set and watch Gilligan’s Island and I Dream of Jeannie.

Tuesday is date night, and Tina the babysitter will be here soon. She is the daughter of my mom’s friend. She has long dirty-blond hair and cornflower blue eyes. She is beautiful, and I want to be like her. When she babysits, our time together always starts out fun, but as bedtime approaches she brandishes her ball-point pen like a weapon from her barricade of sofa cushions and a stack of colorful spiral notebooks piled around her on the sofa. She threatens me not to come downstairs “or else.” I am afraid to be upstairs alone, so I hover in tears at the bottom step.
and beg her to please let me watch TV with her in the living room. She screams at me from the other room that she is doing her homework, and if I am not back in my bed in five seconds, she will wallop my behind. I can’t imagine Tina hitting me, but her tone tells me she means business. I whimper my way back up the steps and arrange my stuffed animals around me like sentinels. I cover my head with my blanket to keep the vampires from biting my neck and lie awake staring at the yellowed reflection of the hall light on my balcony doors. I imagine them opening to Barnabus Collins or Count Dracula, and I am certain that my open eyes are the only thing keeping the vampires from their silent, telekinetic form of breaking and entering. I hold my breath and wait for my mom to return. Then, I muster all my courage and throw back my covers to dart across the dark hallway to jump in bed beside her. I curl up beside my mother’s warm body and cover my head. The shower in her bathroom makes a funny sound at night—a sort of scratching and clicking in the pipes. In my head, I beg God to please, please, please make that sound stop because it scares me. Eventually, the sound does stop, and I fall asleep nestled into the warmth of my softly snoring mother.

I wake up late for school. My mother is pulling the covers off the bed because nothing else has roused me. She is ready to leave. I have missed the school bus, my glass of Carnation Instant Breakfast has gone warm on the kitchen table, and my mother knows she will be late for work. She claps her hands, singing, “Rise and shine, Sleepy Head! C’mon. I mean it, Tammy. If you’re not out of that bed in five seconds, I’m going to have to spank you.”

Unlike Tina’s threat the night before, my mother’s threats have no effect on me because I know they are meaningless. She has only ever spanked me once, on a rainy night when my panicked flee to her bedroom was blocked by a door lock. I had crumpled at the foot of the door, screaming, weeping and begging my mother to let me in until, after a half hour of gentle
admonishments to return to my room because nothing was going to get me, and sometimes
mommies just needed a night to sleep alone, something in her had snapped. She had slammed
open the door so hard it banged against the wall, screamed directly into my shocked, tear-
streaked face, twirled my little pj’d form around and began beating my bottom with a flimsy
yardstick while I screamed, “No, Mommy! Nooooo!”

After three whelps across the bottom, though, my mother had broken down in tears,
tossed the measuring stick aside and enfolded me into her arms, rocking and crooning about how
sorry she was. Then she carried back to her bed, where I sniveled my way to sleep within
minutes.

I remain motionless under her covers until I hear her open the front door to the apartment
downstairs and yell, “I’m leaving!”

I jump out of bed and answer, “Just a minute!” to which my mother replies, “I haven’t
GOT a minute!”

I run into my room, pick up the crumpled dress on the floor beside my bed—the one I
wore two days ago—and throw it over my head, slipping my nightgown down over my hips in
one swift motion. My mother starts the countdown. I hate the countdown. It alarms and
disorients me, and I cannot function while she is counting backwards—FIVE, FOUR, THREE,
TWO…

“Wait!!!” I scream, scrambling on my belly under my bed to find my missing right shoe.

“NOW!” she hollers, and I take the stairs two at a time, my right Buster Brown in one hand, the
left flapping loosely on my sockless left foot, a dirty pair of mismatched socks in my left hand.
“Drink your breakfast,” she tells me. “I don’t want you to be hungry. Hurry up. I’ll wait.”

I gulp down the Carnation Instant Breakfast drink which has been sitting on the table for 45 minutes and is now separated and slightly sour-tasting. I wipe the chocolate milk mustache from my upper lip and grab my plaid school satchel on the way out the door. Inside, my Reading and Writing notebooks and parent permission slips have remained untouched since the day before, when I packed them up in the classroom. No one has mentioned homework to me, and as on most days, the thought of school and the teacher’s assignments had vanished from my head the moment I left the classroom and did not return until I entered it again.

We arrive at my school half an hour late, and my mother drops me off at the front door. I have to go to the Principal’s office to get a hall pass, and when I get to my classroom, the other kids have already handed in their homework assignments and are taking turns reading aloud from their reading notebooks. If my teacher cares about the fact that my homework and reading assignments are never done, she doesn’t mention it to me, other than to write giant Xs in bright red marker throughout my notebook pages. When I do remember to write in my notebook, she writes notes about my handwriting and puts angry red slashes through my frequent misspellings. Either way, it seems that whatever I do antagonizes her, so it really doesn’t matter to me one way or the other if I get angry red markings for doing or not doing the work.

What does bother me is how the reading stops when I come into the room, and the way that everyone looks at me in my crumpled, dirty dress from two days ago and my mismatched socks. The sound of my shoes on the polished linoleum floor seems deafening as I head past the now silent reader and take my place at the small metal chair with the desk attached to it.
Glancing over her shoulder to see if I am settled in yet, the reading girl resumes the paragraph, painstakingly enunciating each word as her finger keeps track of her place in front of her.

The fire bell rings over a loud speaker, and our teacher claps her hands and tells us to pay close attention and to do exactly as she says. We line up beside the door and walk single file into the gray brick hallway, now abuzz with lines of excited children. Our teacher tells us to put our hands over our heads like so. She demonstrates like a stewardess showing airplane passengers how to use a seat belt. She tells us to line up with our backs against the wall; to crouch down and cover our heads with our arms. She shushes us into silence and reminds us that these instructions may save our lives if Russia drops a nuclear bomb on our school.

I can hear my heart beating inside my ears. I put my face to my knees and bury my head under my folded arms. I squeeze my eyes shut tight against the fluorescent hall lighting. The hallway becomes eerily silent as hundreds of us—from Pre-K to fifth grade—press our backs against the cinder blocks and wait. If the explosion annihilates our planet, we will remain safely huddled inside our school’s hallways.
In second grade, I am bussed after school to the community room in St. Luke’s Day Care—a pink brick church with a tall white steeple. Each day offers various activities—Monday, knitting; Tuesday, art; Wednesday, guitar, Thursday, free-play, and Friday movies. Here is where I discover the solitary joy of knitting—though I never progress beyond the simple “knit one; purl two” stitch. I become a prolific knitter, creating Barbie doll clothes, booties, arm bands, and scarves in poly-cotton blend Rainbow yarn. I love the clicking of the long blue needles and the calming effect of the repetitive motion. My favorite day care supervisor is Mrs. Brock, and she is the one who teaches me how to knit. This is where I am introduced to The Music Man and soon after, I ask my mom for the album, which I play and replay on my portable record player (box-shaped, purple bottom and white top, with large, brightly colored flowers on top.) There is an arm that allows me to stack several records at once, and they drop roughly on top of each other as the needle arm moves out of the way and then back again to land gently on the first vinyl groove. My favorite song is “Marian, the Librarian,” and I listen to Robert Preston over and over again, lifting the needle and replacing it again until I have worn a groove at the beginning of the song.

On “Art Day,” I proudly sketch a nude human female in a series of ovals and angles, just the way my artist step-mother has taught me. When I lift my paper to show Miss Diane, the art supervisor, she snatches it out of my hands and yanks me by the arm to a back room. My cheeks burn in shame as she berates me loudly for drawing “filth.” She confiscates the drawing, and my
campmates stare curiously as I am made to sit on the sidelines for the rest of the day until Miss Diane can have a word with my mother.

At recess, I swing listlessly and push the dirt beneath the swing-set with my big toe. Eventually, Mrs. Brock comes to join me. She groans a bit as she lowers herself into the swing adjacent to mine. I am filled with shame when she asks me about the art incident. She’ll hate me for sure, I think. She’ll know there’s something terribly wrong with me—something dirty, dark, sick. I avoid her gaze as I mumble answers to her inquiry, which goes something like this:

“Tell me about the picture you drew, Tammy.”

My cheeks burn.

“Miss Diane told me you drew something…upsetting. Do you know what she’s talking about?”

“Yes.”

“What was the picture, Tammy?”

“—a lady—nude,” I mumble, embarrassed.

“Why did you want to draw a nude woman, dear?”

“My step-mother gave me a book that shows you how—“

“A book?”

“A book about learning how to draw,” I say. “She’s an artist.”

Mrs. Brock’s face relaxes, and she smiles.
“Well, that’s just wonderful! So you’re interested in drawing, dear?”

“Sort of,” I shrug. “But I’m not very good at it.”

“Can I see your picture, dear?”

“She took it,” I say.

“Well, let’s just go and ask her for it, then.”

I am relieved when Mrs. Brock does not appear shocked that I was drawing a nude woman, and I brighten a bit as she takes me by the hand to retrieve my drawing from Miss Diane, who fumes when asked to return it. I bite the inside of my cheek as Mrs. Brock holds up my amateur effort and turns her head a bit to one side as she examines the picture.

“Well, dear. I think this is very good! I am quite impressed. I think that you should be proud of this work, Tammy.”

I look up from the floor, and my heart swells with love for this woman who approves of me and defends me to Miss Diane, who appears fit to be tied at this point. Her eyes flash, and her face turns bright red. She snatches the drawing away from Mrs. Brock and admonishes her, says something to the effect of, “I hardly think it’s appropriate for you to encourage this sort of thing, Dorothy. I’m surprised at you, really.”

Mrs. Brock tells her I’ve done nothing wrong, that she should look inside herself before searching for evil in little girls—that she will not tolerate her making little kids feel bad about themselves just because her head is full of dirt.

I watch the exchange wide-eyed.
Miss Diane says she intends to have a talk with my mother when she arrives and adds something to the effect of, “We cannot allow our children to go around drawing naked people.”

Mrs. Brock lifts herself above Miss Diane’s angry frame—a half-smile on her face and says, “You do that, Diane. But I will be there, too.”

When my mother arrives, I watch as Mrs. Brock and Miss Diane converge upon her at the same time. After an animated discussion, my mother holds my picture up to look at it, then she smiles at me and turns to Miss Diane with an angry face. I can’t hear what she says, but Miss Diane walks away in a huff, and my mother smiles at Mrs. Brock, who comes to get me for dismissal.

“Your mother agrees that you made a lovely picture today, Tammy,” she says in front of the other day campers. She hands me the drawing, and I raise my chin, pick up my book satchel and run to greet my mother, who gives me a big hug and tells me how impressed she is with my artwork. I look back over my shoulder at Mrs. Brock as we leave. She winks at me, and I puff with pride and happiness at having her as an ally.

It is, however, my last attempt at drawing nudes.
Family Assembly

After a year of typing, filing and answering phones at an investment firm, my mother’s soon-to-be divorced boss asks her out on a date.

“He’s not really my type,” she tells me before bed, after returning from their first date, her hair newly washed and bangs taped into place. “For one thing, he’s sort of pudgy,” she says. “And he has two children younger than you. I’ve seen pictures of them, and they’re adorable as they can be, but the whole thing is just too much. His wife is crazy…beautiful, but absolutely crazy when she drinks. I just don’t know if I really want to get involved in the whole thing. Besides, he’s my boss.”

I sigh in disappointment and turn my attention back to the Glen Campbell Show.

A few weeks later, my mom decides to give her new suitor a second chance. She goes out with him again, and when he asks her what it is about him that gives her pause, she tells him point blank that he needs to lose weight and finish getting his divorce if he wants to have a relationship with her.

I guess that pretty much seals the deal because pretty soon, my mom is coming home late from work almost every night, her steadily thinner, now-divorced boss on her arm. At Christmastime, he buys us a “Magic Maid” service for our messy apartment. For Easter, he buys me a fairy princess nightgown in pale yellow nylon.

My mom and I begin spending our evenings with him, dining at Bud Bigelow’s steak house then heading back to his two bedroom furnished condo rental nearby. Pretty soon, I am
sleeping in one of the rented twin beds in the spare bedroom, waking up early to get dressed and
go to school. To fill the alone time before bed, I began writing stories and poems, which I stash
in the bedside drawer each morning before leaving the condo. I write dozens of stories—about a
caterpillar who makes the long trek up a blade of grass, only to be knocked back down again
every time the wind blows; about “Tilly the Turtle,” who decides not to bother with the race
against the hare and goes off exploring the forest, instead; poems about wolves eating children
while villagers listen to the lonely baying in the distance and cover themselves up under their
blankets, tucked safely inside their warm homes. My stories are usually cryptic, spattered with
first attempts at poetry or imagery borrowed from tales I’ve read at school. But I feel a rush and a
sense of accomplishment when I finish them, as though I sense that what I am doing is going to
lead to greater things someday.

The decision has already been made by the time I am first introduced to my soon-to-be
step-sister and brother, Kendal and Ben. We meet in the parking garage below the Galleria
Shopping Mall. My mother’s boss, who I am told to call “Ed,” is waiting for us in his pale
orange Mercedes Benz, the motor idling. My mother has retrieved me from my group skating
lesson (paid for by Ed), and she chatters excitedly all the way to the underground lot about what
angels Ed’s kids are and how his little girl Kendal looks like me, with big brown eyes, a turned
up nose and brown hair. She tells me the little boy Ben is cute as a button and has the longest
lashes she’s ever seen on a boy.

I am ready to love my sister before I even open the car door. I am dying to have a sister—
someone I can play Barbies with, share secrets with, laugh with, read with. I have no use for the
boy—just under three, he is full of annoying curiosity about things and continually tries to insert
himself into the world I want for Kendal and me alone.
Kendal is everything I’ve imagined in a sister and more—she is four years younger than me, easily led, quiet enough to allow me center stage and eager to look up to her older, smarter and more experienced almost step-sister. We eat dinner at a Mexican restaurant near our apartment, and then we all go back there. I barricade myself and my two unsuspecting guests in the bathroom and create potions out whatever I find in the vanity cabinets. I force them to drink the concoctions until Ben manages to unlatch the door and run screaming down the stairs. I smile at Kendal, and when she shyly smiles back, I shrug and wait for the punishment to come, not caring. I have impressed her. And I have gotten rid of him for a while.

Months go by, and Kendal and Ben’s visits to Ed’s condo are more and more frequent. We play dress-up and hang upside down from the staircase banisters, pretending the sparkly popcorn ceiling is an upside down world in another dimension, and we are princesses. Ben tries to insert himself into our convoluted plots, but we politely ignore him—never going so far as to be openly hostile, but giving him mundane little tasks to perform as our vassal so that he spends most of his time out of our way.

On Valentine’s Day, Ed gives Kendal and me matching nightgowns—blue, with empire waste-bands covered with cloth daisies and soft nylon sashes that tie in a big bow in the back. Our princess fantasy is complete. We live in the nightgowns—putting them on as soon as we arrive at the condo and only taking them off when we begrudgingly have to get ready for school on Monday morning.

One afternoon, my mother and I arrive at the condo to find its contents being carted outside by several burly men. The rental agreement on the furniture, and the condo itself, has expired, and Ed has to make a decision about where to go from here. His real belongings are in
two houses and a storage unit in a suburb of Beaumont, where he lived with his wife before the separation.

The apartment I share with my mother at Trafalgar West isn’t really suited for company. I sleep in a single twin, and the only other bed is my mother’s queen, which is where I end up most nights, anyway, as I am terrified of the dark and imagine I hear footsteps coming up the staircase in the hall outside my bedroom. There is no place to put Ed and his two kids, so the pressure is on to start making big decisions.

I am so shocked to see the furniture passing by me on my way in the door that I have failed to register the fact that all of my writing and artwork have just been carted out the door inside the rented dresser. By the time I realize what has happened, it is too late to retrieve the stories and poems—they have been thrown out; the furniture had been rented.

I mourn the loss of my writing, but I have plenty of distractions to help me move beyond the loss. I have fallen in love with the whole idea of living in a house somewhere with my new sister, and Ed seems sort of okay to me—even buys me nice things—so I am doing my best to persuade my mom that marrying her boss will make everybody happy. I routinely leave little crayon pictures with encouraging notes around the apartment, like “Say ‘yes,’ Mommy!” under a picture of a man on his knees in front of a princess. When she comes home from a date, I ask her, “So…Did he propose yet?”

One day, she says, “Yes, he did…and I told him, ‘Okay.’”

My mother’s eyes are moist with what I interpret to be tears of joy. Not yet understanding the subtle signals of apprehension, I throw my arms around her and squeal at the news. Now, we will live in a real house. Now, I will have a real sister. Now my mother will never be alone.
again. Now I will have a balanced set of parents—happy couples on both ends, weighted evenly in loving relationships that will remove from me the burden of filling in their missing pieces.
My mother accepts her boss’ marriage proposal—not because she is in love (though she will grow to love him and his off-beat cynicism), and not because he is rich (though the thought of how he could provide for us does weigh in the decision and her mother always told her it’s just as easy to love a rich man as it is to love a poor man)—but because he seems to love and need her so very much.

Sweet Kendal has almost no vices. To all appearances, she is good, through and through—too good by my accounting. She is, however, prone to sudden moodiness where her brother is concerned and occasionally hauls off and slaps him for no apparent reason, cooing and cradling him in her arms maternally after the unprovoked assault, when he cries like a baby. To my mind, this gives her some depth. Otherwise, she’s a bit a ninny. She has not one competitive bone in her body and simply gives up during board games if she is behind, crying about how she isn’t good at anything. On nights we all sleep over together in the condo, she and I take turns tickling each other’s backs under the covers, and she always lets me go last, so I can fall asleep being caressed.

I love her.

A few months after Ed proposes, my grandparents accompany me and my mother to the airport. We are saying goodbye at the gate when I am told the news—when she and Ed return, she will have a new last name—his, theirs.

I don’t know why this is a shock to me.
I suppose I must have imagined that there would be a wedding, where my mother would wear a long, white dress and walk down the aisle; where I would walk, dropping rose petals in front of the bride, followed by my new sister and brother. I’m sure someone must have told me at some point, but it is only as I hug my mother and her boss goodbye and watch through the long plate glass window as the plane steers away from the gate, only as I place my hand into my grandmother’s hand and turn to leave the terminal without my mother, only then that I come to the realization that I am to be no part of this marriage—no part of the wedding, in Las Vegas—no part of the union. Instead, I have been abandoned by the only person in my world. My mother is no longer mine. She is his. And theirs. And ours. But she is no longer mine. Her universe no longer revolves around me. I begin to cry, and my grandmother shushes me.

“Don’t worry. She’ll be home soon enough.”

I have no words to express my irrational fear—that my mother will never come home.
Sleep with the Angels

My mother is a “stay-at-home” mom for the first time in my life. She breeds Lhasa Apso puppies, decorates the house, and collects antiques. She buys an ancient pump organ with dozens of polished ivory knobs and foot pedals that fill its bellows with air. She buys Victrola’s in all different shapes and sizes. She buys floor-to-ceiling music boxes with dozens of large metal discs with holes punched in them that produce an orchestra of sound when they turn on the spindle. They fill what we refer to as “the music room” and surround the black Yamaha baby grand that my mother practices at daily. She takes lessons and signs Kendal and me up for lessons, too.

One day, I come home from school, and Claudia, our housekeeper, tells me to go upstairs to get out of my “Sunday clothes” before I go outside to play. I argue with her that I’m just wearing my plain old school clothes and don’t see the need to change before I go out, but she insists I do as I’m told, and so I march loudly up the staircase, prepared to slam the bedroom door behind me, but when I open the door to my room, I realize why she wanted me to come upstairs—The beds, which had been facing the hallway door, have been moved across to the other side, against the wall, and where my bed had previously stood sits a French White and gold-trimmed Sohmer & Co. piano—my very own piano!

Claudia has three children of her own and brings them to our house sometimes when she is asked to babysit after hours or on the weekends. She is a large black woman with bad feet. She moves slowly and breathes hard. She speaks to us with sugary sweetness, even when admonishing us for our frequent bad attitudes or behavior, but when her kids act up (which they
do frequently, around us, anyway), her voice drops into a masculine register, and she threatens—and often administers—“whoopins.” We are equally contemptuous and terrified of her, not realizing that the “whoopin” threats can have nothing to do with us. We take her seriously when her voice drops low, but when she puts us to bed, turns off the lights and stands in the doorway just before leaving our room, we stifle giggles because we have so often mimicked her goodnight blessing, “Y’all sleep with the angels now, y’hear?” We repeat the phrase to each other in our best Claudia voices after she has retreated to the downstairs, where her own three children sleep on the sofa until our parents return, when they will be piled into the old Dodge my folks bought her a year before when she complained about having to take the bus back to her neighborhood across town so late with the kids.

A few weeks after I get my new piano, my mother catches Claudia stealing an old blanket my mom had set out for Good Will. Though the blanket had no monetary or intrinsic value, my mother fires Claudia because of the broken trust. She is allowed to keep the car. And the old blanket, I guess.
Over the Rainbow

I transfer into Memorial Drive Elementary School in the middle of third grade. Mrs. Banks is my teacher, and she is beautiful and cheery. With a friendly smile and a quick toss of her long, ash blond hair, she introduces me to the class on my first day. The kids smile, happy to have a new person in class and to have a break from their classwork as they welcome a stranger to their school. On the playground at recess, girls ask me where I’ve come from and where I live. I tell them my old school was Briargrove, but my mom just remarried, and now we live in Memorial, and that’s that. They have no idea where Briargrove is and really don’t care. My answer is good enough. My honorary celebrity status as the new kid lasts for a week or so.

My mother gives my new friend Karen C. a lift home after school. She lives only a few blocks from my new house, in an affluent neighborhood called Willowgrove, and all the ride home, I brag about the “mansion” we live in. Only when we pull up in front of her house, it is a suburban Tara—complete with 40 foot white columns and a mammoth chandelier lantern hanging from the circular driveway’s covered carport. I am stunned into silence and shrink into the floorboard as she waves goodbye and tells me she can’t wait to come over and see my house, which, I note, is half the size of hers. I realize I will have to adjust my sense of scale now that we are rich—that there are differing degrees of rich, or at least, that there are differing degrees of showing people how rich one is.

Our house, three quarters of the way down a sleepy cul-de-sac called Meadowick, is built to resemble, with its aged pink brick, scalloped roof tiles and gabled windows, a stately French chateau. Set back from the road by a lush lawn with tall pines, a circular driveway of pink and gray pebbles curls past the front of the house to an ornate black iron gate that, when opened
manually by a sliding iron bar set into the ground, allows entry to a covered carport connecting
the house to a four-car garage. Above the garage is an apartment the realtor called “the servant’s
quarters,” but we just call it, “the room over the garage.”

Two massive carved oak doors lead to a gray and white marble entry-way with a weighty
brass chandelier that hangs from a thick chain one the story above. A wide, blue-carpeted spiral
staircase winds with white iron railings winds like a nautilus to the second story, where there are
three enormous bedrooms with gratuitous, marbled bathrooms—one set between two of the
bedrooms, with connecting doors. In the corner of the upstairs hallway, the walk-in closet is
almost as large as any bedroom I have lived in up to this point.

The upstairs hallway circles the perimeter of the open space of the entry hall and wraps
around an enormous dropped chandelier, forming a narrow catwalk behind the two front-facing
windows. This is my favorite place to read. On rainy afternoons, I drag my sleeping bag, a
pillow, and a stack of library books (I never check out just one, but as many as my arms can
carry), and I snuggle into the farthest corner underneath sheer panels between thick, ice blue silk
drapes. Here, I happily disappear for hours, until the waning sunlight and resulting shadows
make it impossible to see the page in front of me. Nobody looks for me in my hiding nook, but if
they ever decide to, lying prone and still in my blue sleeping bag on the blue carpet beneath the
blue drapery, I am all but invisible, even in plain sight.

My parents’ bedroom and master bath are on the first floor, across the cavernous entry
hall, on the opposite end of the house. There is a small guest bathroom beside it and a formal
library beside that, just to the right of the front door upon entering. The library is an oak-paneled,
traditional sort of room with floor-to-ceiling shelves stacked with gold-embossed, leather-bound
volumes of classics and richly illustrated history books. A gun cabinet with locked glass doors looms over a sturdy, wax-scented desk with green leather trim and brass studs. On one of the top bookshelves, in the center of the far wall, my step-father has placed his childhood set of *Oz* books—first editions with pastel-colored, illustrated covers. Kendal, Ben and I are forbidden to mess with these books—the only ones in his library worth getting into as far as we’re concerned—and because of that, we are drawn to the room, with its untouchable booty. On nights when our parents are out, Kendal and I longue on the library’s brown leather sofa, our feet resting atop the glass-topped coffee table cabinet that houses collectible hand guns and military metals from the first and second World Wars. When we are certain we won’t be caught, one of us climbs from the sofa’s arm to the base of the bookshelves’ cabinet, and shimmies our way to the right, one barefoot toe at a time, gripping the molding on the upper shelf as we slide our way toward the coveted collection. Transferring the ancient and delicate volume from the upper shelf to the waiting arms below takes finesse and threatens to send the climber reeling backwards onto the glass coffee table if we aren’t careful, so there is a delicious element of danger involved in our sneaky forays, which makes the whole adventure about so much more than reading a book. It is a bonding experience—this willingness to risk punishment and limb just in order to share the perusal of a forty year old, dusty book.
In fourth grade, I am invited to a sleepover birthday party at Karen C.’s house. In her backyard, we spin from a teardrop-shaped macramé chair that hangs from an impossibly tall pine. Two girls pull four crammed into the three-seater chair across one side of the yard then let it go. Like a wound top, we careen in dizzying loops to the opposite end of the park-like yard, where another two girls latch onto the bamboo bottom, pull, and send the chair spinning back to the other side. Wedged between the two girls, laughing with them, I am euphoric. I finally belong.

We eat birthday cake as Karen opens her presents in a living room where the lamps and furniture are super-scaled to fit a giant’s house. We dangle our legs from the tall sofas and disappear into the marshmallow cushions under the yellow glow of bulbous four-foot high lamps. The presents disappear beneath mounds of torn wrapping paper and unread greeting cards as we follow Karen up an oak staircase and through a labyrinth of passageways to a narrower stair that leads to a third floor attic converted into a playroom. We play ping pong, air hockey, and pinball, then we gather our sleeping bags into a circle and put each other into trances and whisper ghost stories until her parents yell upstairs at us to go to sleep. We wait until the house is still, and then we tiptoe downstairs into the cavernous kitchen and flip on the light switch. A thousand Texas-sized cockroaches make a mad scramble in all directions. We scream and stampede out of the room and back up the stairs, and shudder at the revolting snaps of thick, squished Palmetto bodies under my feet.
Karen’s house is straight out of Architectural Digest and has a full-time, live-in maid. It is immaculate. I remain friends with her through ninth grade and am frequently invited over to spend the night, but I never get over the phobia I develop on this night of her kitchen and of walking around her house in the dark.
My mother has unofficially changed my last name to that of my step-father. It makes sense, she says, because it is now her last name and that of my two step-siblings. Why should I be the only one in the family with a different last name? I agree because I want to have the same name as my mother, even though I am sad to no longer have my father’s name and that of my half-brother and sister. But I rarely see them anymore since they have moved to a subdivision about an hour outside of town, and my weekends are filled with new friends and family obligations, so I agree to be called by the new last name. My mother shows me pretty ways to write the “Q” with long, curly calligraphy, and I practice on my magic rainbow writing board, enamored with the new signature, the new “me.”

The new me lives in a huge house set on an acre and a half. I have a part-time sister who shares my room with matching faux brass canopy beds and plush, colorful Holly Hobby comforters. My mom and step-father take vacations to Europe and cruises on the QE II. They go out to dinner and leave the number of the local pharmacy, where we have a house account.

“If you need anything, just order it, and they’ll deliver,” my mom says.

I order candy bars, sodas, pens and notebooks. I order paperback novels, Nyquil, yo-yos, coloring books, crayons. I can have anything I want delivered by just calling. Sometimes I call the pharmacy more than once a night—just for the excitement of having a delivery of stuff. Lollypops, gum, movie magazines, records—the pharmacy has a little bit of everything, and it’s mine if I want it. Things begin to pile up on nights my parents go out. I eat the candy, drink the sodas, chew the gum, and I write short stories in my new notebooks. I read with a flashlight
under the covers after the babysitter has put me to bed—inappropriate books that I’d never check out at the school library, where I’ve already exhausted the William Farley and Laura Ingalls Wilder series’ and have reread Anne Frank so many times I know it by heart. From the pharmacy, I read, “Ben,” a story about rats, “The Rats,” another story about rats, “The Swarm,” a tale about killer bees, and “The Exorcist,” which terrifies me so much that I try to dispose of it in a drainage pipe behind the house. When its waterlogged pages block the pipe a week later, I pick it up by my thumb and index finger and carry it around in a panic, looking for a safe place to stash it then end up hurling it over the garden wall into the next door neighbor’s backyard. I worry for the next year that the neighbor, Mrs. Baker, will find the water-logged contraband and come knocking on our door about the paperback.

We have a large, heated, in-ground swimming pool with a rock fountain that continuously trickles water into the deep end and serves as a diving platform. My mother plants hibiscus flowers around the water fall. I invite my friends over to swim during the summertime, and I enjoy a newfound popularity. I host a slumber party where girls climb the white iron banister around the entrance hall and literally swing from the chandelier. My house is “cool.”

My mother purchases a pedigreed Lhasa Apso and names her Missy. When Missy has puppies, they sleep in a plywood box frame in the laundry room until they are old enough to romp around the property. My step-father banishes them from the house when they begin chewing things, and my mother has a large aluminum shed built for them in the back part of the yard, complete with low-to-the-ground windows, an electric radio, a black and white TV, and an air conditioner. The puppies refuse this hospitality in favor of the garage, so on weekends, Kendal and I turn the puppy house into a playhouse. We haul sleeping bags and forbidden books out there at night and listen to the radio, watch TV, chew bubble gum, and read scary stories to
each other until each fallen pine needle on the roof becomes a potential intruder, evil spirit or bear and we are too afraid to sleep and make a dash for it back to the safety of the house.
The room over the garage has a small kitchen and a full bathroom. I turn it into a store one day and make fliers that I distribute throughout the neighborhood, announcing my “shop”. I tape price tags on discarded Barbie dolls, old blankets, homemade artwork, and clothing pilfered from the floor of my mother’s closet, and I wait. After several hours, my mother visits and purchases a few items she’ll toss back into my toy box later.

A few months later, our new maid Tita takes up residence in the little apartment after her arrival in the back of a pickup truck from her home in Mexico. She is a teenager with a blanket of shiny black hair that falls down her back, and she wears pink smock tops with buttercup sleeves. She blushes when we speak to her and understands no English at all—none. My mother communicates with her through hand signals—pointing at the pile of laundry and walking her to the laundry room; showing her how to use the dishwasher, ironing board, etc. Tita blushes, giggles, and nods her head to show that she has understood. Whenever there is a communication that seems impossible to translate via hand signals, my mother calls up the neighbor across the street who speaks fluent Spanish, had arranged for Tita’s transport and is hosting one of Tita’s sisters.

One night, my mother tells us Tita has a surprise—she has offered to cook us an authentic Mexican meal. Tita is in the kitchen for hours, and we anticipate the event all day as we smell the hot oil and tortillas simmering in the pan. When suppertime arrives, my mother ooh’s and ah’s over the giant plate of beans and rice and the homemade tortillas Tita brings to our table. Tita nods, blushed and returns to the kitchen—presumably, to prepare the second course. But
when the tortillas and beans and rice have all been passed around and eaten, Tita does not return to the table. My mother calls her in and tells her how delicious the first course was and that it is okay to bring the rest of the meal now. Tita blushes and shakes her head to show she doesn’t understand. My mother goes with her into the kitchen and opens the oven door to find it is empty. She opens the refrigerator to see if there is a platter of something inside, but there is not. She looks at the stove top and sees only the empty skillets where the beans and tortillas had been, then digs in her memory to produce the Spanish words, “Donde’ es mas?”

Tita shrugs and blushes, not understanding.

“Mas, Senora?”

“Si,” says my mother. “The tortillas and beans – Bueno! Pero, donde es mas comeda?” Where is more food?

We have been waiting at the table for our next course, but Tita begins to cry loudly in gasping, staccato Spanish—which sounds to us like, “ablablablaayeeayeeablaablaabla” mixed with the frequently interspersed words, “Tortillas” or “beans,” again and again, so my sister and I run into the kitchen to see what the ruckus is about. Has she dropped the platter of food? Did something burn? What on earth—?

Tita holds her breath when she sees us. Her face is beet red, and my mother’s face is pale, with a sheepish, apologetic expression. My mother opens the refrigerator and says, “No worries. We have plenty of leftovers here.”

Tita looks from my mother to me and Kendal, then cries, “Tortillas!” one more time, covers her face and runs through the kitchen door and up the side steps to the room above the
garage. We can hear her crying through the rest of dinner while my mother, who speaks no Spanish, aside from the useless, “La luna est grande’” tries to console her. My step-father makes an awkward call to the lady across the street, and Tita’s sister is eventually summoned to straighten out the misunderstanding. In hushed tones, over leftovers, my mother explains to us that an “authentic” Mexican meal where Tita is from apparently consists of tortillas, rice and beans—nothing else. We have mortified her and ourselves by expecting more.

The next morning, Tita goes about her housecleaning quietly and refuses to make eye contact. A few days later, a tentative peace is established when my mother makes a present of the negligee nightgown Tita had been admiring. Soon after, Tita cuts off her beautiful long hair and exchanges the pink smock tops for an ugly white uniform. From opposite sides of the Rio Grande, we coexist on Meadowick until my mother and I make our inevitable departure several years later. Tita will eventually marry the gardener, and together they will live in the apartment above the garage until sometime in the mid-90s, when my step-father and his new wife move to the Austin area. She never cooks for us again.
In fifth grade we line up on the blacktop before school and perform cartwheels, round-offs, and flip flops. Tressie Quebe is four feet tall, tight and springy, with brown eyes and straight brown hair that is blunt cut at her waistline and held off her face with a thick black plastic headband. She wears corduroys, sneakers, a clean t-shirt tucked into her pants, and an unbuttoned blue jean jacket. She drops her school satchel in the grass and yells, “Watch this!” as she takes a running leap into a combination round-off/flip-flop. We say, “Wow!” and she caps off the feat with a standing back flip then brushes her hair from her neck, picks up her book bag, and slings it over one shoulder, clearly the winner of our undeclared contest.

The bell rings, and we follow her to the fifth grade wing—a single, corrugated aluminum-covered sidewalk with four doors leading into cinderblock classrooms. Inside the Social Studies room, Belynda “BB” Kurio shows off her newly pierced ears and green eye shadow. She is the first among us to be pierced and to wear makeup and thus becomes our trend-setter, much to our parents’ chagrin. BB has golden brown hair that flows in careless waves to her bottom. She wears hair ties with vibrant colored beads, and she chews gum in class. Born three months premature, she is forever petite—a tiny adult, cool to us in grade school, diminutive and perky as a high school cheerleader but somehow proportionally wrong as she ages into adulthood—her head too round, her chin too dimpled, eyes too flat. But here in fifth grade, we all want to be like her and run home daily to beg for pierced ears, green eye shadow, bubble hair ties, and brightly colored gaucho pants.
At recess, I throw one leg over the lowest metal uneven parallel bar and spin until I am upright again. Tressie runs and springs up to the higher bar beside me, flips upside down, slides one leg over the bar and hoists herself into the same split position, just above and beside me. Side by side, we spin and upright ourselves, laughing.

“Hey! Can you do this?” she asks, then drops backwards and hangs from both knees upside down. I say, “Sure!” and do the same, my hair grazing the asphalt below.

“How about this?” she asks. She swings back and forth from her knees until she has achieved enough momentum to release her legs and land upright on her two feet in front of the bars, her arms above her head and held stiffly out to each side like Nadia Comaneci.

I want to impress her—to keep this friendly, newfound camaraderie in motion and seal our friendship. I’ve done this trick at the gym—on higher bars—but never from the low bar on the playground—over asphalt and not a mat. But there is too much at stake to say, “No.”

I tuck my chin to my chest to avoid slamming my head on the asphalt, and I swing until I have lift then release my legs and swing my knees forward with all my might, saying a silent prayer.

Miraculously, my feet land, and I am able to pull my torso upright and do the “tada!” gymnast thing with my arms. The bell rings, and Tressie gives me a thumbs up and a smile before running back to class. Over her shoulder, she yells, “See you at the next recess!” and I am lit from within as the seed of a new (and lasting) friendship is planted.
When Kendal is Here

When Kendal is here, we practice standing on the seats of our banana bikes, one leg delicately pointing behind us, as we arabesque in slow, leaning loops behind the garage. Or we ride in tandem down our street, past the stop sign at the corner and out of Willowick. We pass the private Kinkaid school (where Kendal will transfer after graduating from St. Lucas elementary school) and head out onto the newly carved out Memorial Drive extension of San Philippe, where we hug the curb as the traffic whirs past us at 50 miles per hour. There are no bike lanes, and we have no helmets. Our hair is loose and streams behind us in the warm wind. We wear flip flops when we wear shoes at all. Sometimes I ride with no hands. I can do that, even with an armful of books or a bag of groceries. We cross the bayou and the Shell station, make a turn at the new traffic light, and we are at the strip mall—our newly discovered Paradise.

Abandoning our bikes at the curb (I won’t own a bike lock until I am in my twenties, living in New York City), we eat turkey Po Boys off the top of a giant wooden spool at Antoine’s, which has rattan ceiling fans, stenciled wine carton stools and smells like a combination of warm bread and pine shavings. We peruse the magazine aisle at the grocery store for the latest Rona Barret's Hollywood or our favorite comics—Wendy, Archie, Casper, and Sad Sack. We fish our pockets for a dime to buy a coke from the machine and plop ourselves down on the sidewalk in front of the store, our backs against the hot bricks, as we read our fan magazines or comics cover-to-cover and slurp our drinks. We toss our cans into the nearest trash container then head for the air-conditioned pharmacy to flip through the .50 cent discount record album bin at the front of the store. We purchase grape Zots that fit neatly into the rooves of our
moutns, and we suck on these and enjoy the sensation of slowly escaping, flavorful fizz, as we ride our bikes back home—a trip which always seems to take twice as long than the ride to the strip-mall.

When Kendal is here, we jump on the trampoline for hours. We practice flips and tummy flops, forward and backward areal jumps and combination sit-drops. We read the same books at the same time so we can discuss them into the night—Julie (Andrews) Edwards’ *Mandy* and *The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles* are our favorites. We memorize passages and pretend to be the characters. We carry our stuffed animals with us to the empty house at the end of the block and dub its Japanese-inspired back yard, with its tiny wooden bridges, babbling creek and curving paths our “Secret Garden.” We snap off pieces of dried grapevine or steal Merit cigarettes from the kitchen drawers and, without actually inhaling, pretend to smoke.

When Kendal is here, she watches *Star Trek* and eats American cheese and Fritos—carefully tearing tiny slices to pad each salty curve of corn chip. She is serious and quiet, easily spooked to tears. My step-father calls her, “Grandma,” as though that is her name. (He and my mother routinely refer to each other as “Marble Eye,” a pet name having something to do with their honeymoon but which has long lost its original significance and is now just their embarrassing version of “Honey.”) Neither Ben nor I have pet names, thank goodness.

Ben, tiny, cherubic, and stubborn as a bull, will not go into the swimming pool without his yellow inflatable *floaties*. We tease him about this until he cries. One day, in the garage, we’re all three playing in the front seat of my step-father’s old army jeep. Ben pushes in the cigarette lighter, says, “What’s this?” then yanks it out of its metal casing and presses the electric hot brand into the tip of his snub nose before we can stop him. Or maybe we don’t try. Kendal
enjoys comforting him. So much so that she is on occasion prone to make him cry just to have an excuse to provide a sisterly hug.

He wears the bullseye for weeks and has to cross his eyes to look at it. This makes us laugh.

Life happens when Kendal is here, but when her mother is sober, we only have her and Ben every other weekend, and the house is too large, the rooms too quiet. As traumatic as I know it is to her when her mother falls “off the wagon,” I find myself praying sometimes that we will get “the call” that will send my step-father out in the middle of the night (for the calls always seem to come in the middle of the night) to rescue my new sister and her annoying little brother from their drunken and dangerous mom.

My mother whispers about suicide attempts and warns me not to say anything that will remind the kids or upset them. She tells me the lawyers are working things out, and perhaps the kids will come to live with us for good this time. But when their mother is not drinking, she’s beautiful, remorseful, repentant, and full of grace. She makes promises and lives up to them for weeks or months at a time, so my step-siblings are only ever temporary visitors, and the house is mine to roam about, the pool mine to swim in, the trampoline mine to jump on, banana bike mine to ride, alone.
Shrinking

On my way to Dr. Hauser’s office, I tell my mother I can’t remember what it feels like to be happy—not that I am sad, just that I don’t remember the feeling of happy. She looks at me with a worried expression. I have recently developed a strong dislike for my step-father, and my mother wants to know what’s wrong. The aversion occurred gradually, over months, but my change in feelings has only recently become overt enough to warrant concern. My routine of goodnight kisses was the first outward sign—from his last (because I love my mom more), to his first (because then my mom’s kiss stays with me instead of his), to no kiss at all (because I cannot stand contact with his face).

Dr. Hauser looks like Sigmund Freud. He pulls on his red beard and watches me squirm in my chair for a half hour once a week. He asks me questions and then says nothing as I ramble on. There are colored drawings on his wall from other little girls and boys who, I guess, also do not like their step-fathers. I visit Dr. Hauser for several months and am always embarrassed when I am called out of class for my “doctor’s” appointment because the kids want to know why I have to see a doctor—am I sick? I don’t know what to tell them.

Dr. Hauser never gives me advice. He just asks a question or two and then pulls on his beard as I try to answer. Sometimes he takes notes or doodles on a pad. He looks bored. His office is stuffy and brown. I feel small in the chair beside his big desk. He looks at me through pale blue eyes and gold-rimmed glasses, waiting for me to speak. I suspect he tells my parents what I say, but silence is not an option, as he will not take his eyes off of me until I say something, so I answer him.
I no longer love my step-father because drinks too much, and his face becomes red and puffy in the evening. He makes us wear matching “Archie Bunker for President” t-shirts in public. When I come home excited to announce my acceptance into the regional choir performance, he says he will not go and that I should not, either because who knows what types of trash will be there—I might have to stand next to “niggers” and get head lice. When I run in tears from the table and up the stairs to my room, he screams, “…and don’t slam that door or you’ll be grounded, little lady,” just before I slam my door. Trying to cut in line at Disneyland, he points and yells, “Are those niggers fighting or just playing?” My mother, Kendal, and I look at our feet, and our ears turn red. Then my mother starts to giggle through her nose. I want to crawl into a sidewalk grate and disappear as he steps in front of the gaping crowd and buys our tickets out of turn. He criticizes my mother’s attempts at cooking. He has banished the puppies from the house. When my step-brother Ben cries at the Captain’s Table on a cruise we take, he yells at him to stop being a baby and to “act like a man.” Ben is only seven and is just sad. Even I feel bad for him.

Joe— our gardener— appreciates it when my step-father gives him his old clothes in a plastic bag, which seems nice unless you’re at our table at dinnertime, when he laughs about how much he loves giving old things to Joe because he just likes to watch him bow and fawn and say, “Thank you, Massa Quinn” as he backs up the driveway with his bag of stinky old stuff.

But I don’t tell him any of this. I don’t tell him—in part because I think Dr. Hauser is Jewish, and partly because I am simply mortified—that my step-father has recently commissioned a black marble bust of Adolph Hitler that now sits on the corner of his desk in the library. We have the head of Adolph Hitler in our library. Even the first edition Oz books can’t
lure me in there now, and I carefully close the double doors to the room when my friends come over to visit.

The other thing I won’t say—because I will not realize it until many years later—is that I am guilty and filled with regret that I allowed my mother to talk me into being adopted by my step-father, even if the school refused (after three years) to continue honoring my de facto last name without the proper legal documentation; even if it made Kendal and Ben my “half” brother and sister—not just “step”—on paper, and even if it meant sitting next to my best school pal Tressie Quebe in home room for the next four years. From the moment the judge approved the adoption and my real father’s name was removed forever from my birth certificate (and genealogy records, I would later find out), I had called my step-father “Dad,” but I hated the word. And now, the library.
Ambitions

Mrs. Gray is my piano teacher. She arrives once a week in the evening carrying sheet music and silver star stickers. She is a heavy woman with an upswept pole of salt and pepper hair. She puffs her way up our curved staircase and sits in my desk chair beside me on my French white piano bench, patiently counting out rhythms as I plunk my way through simplified versions of Beethoven and Mozart masterpieces. When I have satisfactorily accomplished an entire piece, she awards my efforts with a tiny white plastic bust of the composer. After six months of lessons, I have two busts sitting atop my upright, and I am very proud.

During the week, I practice. I slam my fingers on the keys in frustration, scream at the stupid piano, scream at myself, slam the lid shut. My parents scream from downstairs and threaten to take away the piano, stop my lessons. I calm myself and try again.

Twice a week, I go to Byron’s Gymnastics. I do sit ups, push-ups, jumping jacks. I spend hours walking on the balance beam and spinning from the uneven parallel bars, my palms calloused with ripped blisters that ooze pus into the chalk I apply each time I approach a routine. I flip-flop clumsily and am too easily tired on the royal blue floor mat as I try to look cute and graceful, dancing with pointed toes and flipping ponytailed—imagining myself as Olga Korbut or Nadia Comanche.

The vaulting horse is my nemesis—no matter how fast I run, I cannot generate enough lift from the spring board to propel myself all the way over the top and to the other side. I slam into the leather or stop short, afraid of slamming into the leather.
Byrons is thick with humidity and smells like dirty feet on rubber mats, tangy with powder and chalk dust, sweet and sweaty, like polyester leotards and balled up, discarded footies. It’s a tribal odor—the smell of effort, moist concrete, inclusiveness. I run with all my might and bound across the board from my tiptoes, straddle my legs and make contact with the horse a nanosecond too late. I land chin first on the hard mat, my split legs collapsing over me like a broken dousing rod. It is the last time I will clear the vault, and it is the beginning of the end of my Olympic dream.

I remain on the team for another year, but I am vault-shy and no longer bother with the competitions or the horse. I work the beam, where I land on my face one day trying to show off a back walkover to my step-mother, who has come to pick me up. Neither of my hands grip the beam, only my face and shoulder make contact. I become beam-shy. Clumsy on the floor, I cannot keep my feet inside the white taped lines on tumbling runs, and I lose energy halfway through my two minute compulsory routine. I still love the bars, but I begin to anticipate the “thwap” of the missed connection when leaping spread eagle between the high and low bars. My fears become self-fulfilling prophesies. I fall. Thwap. My tail bone takes the punishment. That—and my last shred of confidence. I’m out.

My breasts are growing. I am no longer bouncy and sprite. The sweat gives me acne. My upper thighs feel too exposed in my leotard. I am developing a paunch and feel insecure around my tighter, tinier teammates. I drop out of gymnastics and beg my way into Humphrey’s School of Musical Theatre, where I will attend three days a week for the next several years and where I will finally, at long last, find my real home.
It’s My Party (...and I’ll Cry if I Want To)

For my 14th birthday, we rent a jukebox and host a dance in our garage. Teens spill out into the driveway and beyond the backyard, where we will find empty beer bottles and candy wrappers the next day, into the backyards of the street behind ours. I have invited perhaps 30 guests, but by the end of the night, there are at least a hundred people milling about our property—most of them strangers.

I have three memories of the party. The first—Diana’s arrival. I have not seen her since third grade, and now she is here. Her mother drops her off with a quick hug for me and my mom. Diana is a tall, elegant, clean-cut beauty. She has grown into a replica of her mother, without the 60s hair and eye-makeup. She has a line of tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose. I lock onto those freckles, the only thing about her that makes her at all approachable to me and my teenage awkwardness, and I welcome her to my party with a big hug. Then I abandon her to slow dance with David Murphy when Stairway to Heaven plays. This is memory number two. Not knowing why, I cry silent tears on his shoulder as we move across the concrete garage floor lit by my fluorescent blacklight. When the song is over, he squeezes my hand and disappears into the crowd. I sneak upstairs to my room and call my father—my third 14th birthday party memory.

I remind my father that it is my birthday and he has forgotten to call me. He says he did not call because I am no longer his daughter—that I have a new daddy now to celebrate with. I cry and tell him I love him and that he will always be my daddy, but he says that isn’t true—papers have been signed, agreements have been made, I have made my choice, and I chose a new
daddy. He hangs up, and I run screaming from my room, the birthday and the party forgotten. I climb into my mother’s lap in the living room and sob the conversation onto her shoulder. She is furious and tells me maybe now I understand why she divorced him, and what is wrong with that man, anyway? How could he say such hateful things to his own daughter? She wants to call him and give him a piece of her mind, but I beg her not to. I can’t stand the idea of my parents fighting over something I said. I go to bed, and an hour or so later, the party ends without me.

I will not see or hear from my father again until I am 19 and home for the holidays from New York City. This is the last time I will see Diana until she appears on my Facebook wall 25 years later.
Behind the Glass

I am 18 and turned loose. New York City is dirty in 1981—dangerous, reeking and musical. I am in love. From my summer sublet on the 18th floor, Manhattan shimmers. The ornate arm on the giant clock of the Con Edison building points its way through the hours outside the plate glass of my bedroom window, and I watch with fascination as the clock’s face changes hue—from silver, to gold, blue-purple, pink and steel gray. I lie awake all night gazing at the city and dreaming of how I will make it mine. When morning comes and the colors wash away, when the buildings are blanched beige again by smog, I turn to the wall and sleep.

I am green—a Texan who pronounces Houston Street with a long “u,” like my hometown. My first day in the city, I take my peek-a-poo puppy, Bogie, for a walk down 9th Street, barefoot. I park my car in a “No Standing” zone and am indignant when I receive a ticket. I am not standing—only parking. I try to cancel my first singing job at The Fives because I have a cold. When the bar owner explains that I have signed a contract and am expected to perform, cold or no, or that I will be responsible for the money lost on an empty room, I burst into tears and tell him that I have run out of all my money—what was left of my earnings after a year of singing with a violent bipolar pianist in the gay bars of Montrose and the college fund my mother had given me permission to withdraw after I dropped out of High School and told her I was Broadway bound. The bar owner takes pity on me and offers me a waitressing job.

I perform with my cold to an almost empty room and then take my place alongside the other talented servers—students, singers, actors and comics who are working nights to pay the rent. My customers laugh at my accent. They think it’s cute that I call them, “Y’all.” And even
cuter that I blush a bright hue when they order a “Slow Screw Up Against the Wall.” The bartenders think it’s hysterical that I don’t know it’s a drink. They offer sniffs of cocaine to make the night go by faster. It does.

When the bar closes at 4am, we pool our tips and sit around the baby grand, singing for each other. We’re good. We know it. Undiscovered, but confident. They offer me drinks, but I wretch at the taste of alcohol, so they introduce me to Sloe Gin Fizzes—bright pink, sweet and topped off with an umbrella. One is all it takes, and we’re headed to after-hours clubs…The Underground, CBGBs, The Limelight, The Ritz. We yell over the music and spend our tip money, working our way downtown in shared cabs.

When I get home, the doorman looks at me with a worried, knowing expression, and I smile sheepishly and bobble my way toward the elevator and up to my view. I flip on the tiny black and white television and jiggle the rabbit ears trying to get Dick Van Dyke to clear on the screen. I turn away from the wiggly picture and look out at the clock, now bathed in a soft pinkish-orange. The city is a treasure chest filled with rare jewels. I fall asleep to the sounds of Rob and Laura Petrie and the dream behind the glass.

When my six months are up, it is time to take my suitcases, sheet music, scrapbooks and puppy and leave the sublet. Unlike Houston, New York has little in the way of cheap housing, and I have not saved enough money for a deposit.

“You can stay with me until you find something,” offers Gigi, the bartender.
She is 19 and has thick brown hair that hangs like a bolt of weighty silk down her back. She is tall, thin, with wolf-like blue eyes. She wears button up boy’s Levis and starched pastel dress shirts open at the collar just enough to reveal a full cleavage when she bends over the ice machine to fill her customers’ glasses. She has been on her own since her parents kicked her out of their Queens apartment when she was 16. She has lived in cars, with boyfriends, girlfriends and even, for a few months, her manager, who eventually co-signed a lease for the light-flooded, modern studio we will share.

I am shy at the prospect of living in the tiny space with the beautiful and too-savvy Gigi. When moving day arrives, I buy two wardrobe boxes and toss my belongings inside haphazardly. I follow the Rent-a-Van guys uptown in my beat-up Celica and park illegally in front of a yellow three-story brick building on East 53 St. The apartment is one flight up above an expensive Italian restaurant. Gigi buzzes me inside and gives me the tour——a kitchenette and an open space with bleached- wood floors that serves as the bedroom, living room and dining room in one. There are tall windows overlooking a backyard garden and rows of fire escapes on the backsides of buildings that form the hidden square of scrubby trees, iron benches and concrete walkways below—an urban paradise, but untouchable for us, since our building’s alleyway does not connect to the courtyard. A polished baby grand piano fills half the room-its lid propped fully open, exposing the soundboard and strings inside. The rest of the space is sparse by necessity. There is no television-only a King-sized mattress on a low pine platform, its sheets crisply laundered, a blue cotton coverlet on top. There are two plump pillows side by side, and I realize with discomfort that we will be sharing the bed.

The movers shove my two overfilled wardrobe boxes into the center of the room, their sweaty faces pink with the effort of carting them up the flight of stairs. I pay them in tens and
singles, then thank them for their help. They leave, no doubt disgruntled because I have not yet learned about tipping anyone but waiters and bartenders.

I’m not used to seeing Gigi in the daytime. I feel the need to talk too much—to fill what might be an awkward silence with too many words that say nothing. I sit at the kitchenette counter on a wobbly barstool while Gigi cooks a welcome meal—angel hair with a pesto-marinara sauce and a salad of fresh mixed greens. I am in awe of her cool sophistication. I feel clunky, too short—stupid in her presence. She sips white wine out of a long-stemmed glass, and I drink a Diet Coke from a can while she stirs the pasta and asks questions about my life in Texas.

I fill her in on the basics, then open up more over dinner, sharing about my parent’s divorce and their subsequent remarriages, half-siblings, step-siblings, friends, hopes, dreams, classes and how, first time out of the romance gate, I’d fallen in love with the wrong man——violent, bisexual, bipolar and full of beautiful music and bad news.

She listens as she rinses our two plates in the tiny sink and places them into the cabinet above. She nods and gasps at all the appropriate places and seems impressed that my life has matched hers in drama—that I, too, have suffered. We are alike—she and I. We are strong now, and we know what we want in life. It’s funny how Fate brings people together. She’s glad we have become friends, roomies, even.

The wardrobe boxes need to be unpacked, but since there are no extra drawers or spaces to hang things in the closet, I leave them open in the center of the room—blocking the small amount of space between the piano and the bed.
That night, my dog chases Gigi’s two kittens in circles—12 paws galloping across us each minute or so as we lie side by side under the thin blanket, sleepless. The room never gets dark, and the yellow beams of security lights from the backyards below form sharp triangles on the ceiling. I hug the edge of my side of the mattress and try to make myself invisible, as Gigi thrashes from side-to-side beneath the blanket, eventually shoving her head underneath her pillow and falling asleep.

I awaken at dawn to classical piano. I squint at the clock, then back at Gigi, who seems oblivious to my presence as she plays, her brow furrowed in concentration and her eyes on the page in front of her. The music is beautiful-otherworldly even—but it’s 6:30 in the morning.

“Hello?” I say, hoping that she has simply forgotten that I’m here and is not deliberately trying to be rude.

“Ugh…Geej?”

She jerks her fingers from the keys and looks at me with surprised annoyance.

“Oh. Good morning. Sorry, but I always practice for an hour or two before school. Hope you don’t mind.”

Gigi is a student at Julliard. The dog and kittens have started up again, and they scamper underneath the piano petals, sliding on the hardwood floor.

“Oh…and I don’t want to sound rude or anything, but…” she nods her head in the direction of the giant wardrobe boxes, “we’re going to have to figure out something to do with those. I didn’t realize you had so much stuff……Maybe you could rent a storage space or
something? It’s just that…I mean, there’s just this one room, and there’s no way to get around those…”

She’s asking me to leave already. She’s not saying it, but that’s what she’s thinking. She wants me out. I nod and pull a handful of clothes from the top of an open box, then go into the bathroom to change, a lump in my throat. I wash my face then look in the bathroom mirror until I know my expression and color will not betray the pain of rejection I am feeling. Then I go back into the living room and tell Gigi not to worry—I’m on it, and I leave the apartment to buy a newspaper with classified ads.

A week and several phone calls to my mother later, I have my own place—a third-floor Brownstone walk-up on East 82 St and East End Avenue. I intend to paint it seashell, but the walls instead turn out Pepto Bismol. I decide I like it.

Instead of a kitchenette, my studio has an eat-in kitchen with an ancient, narrow window that faces a two-foot breezeway between my building and the building next door. In the winter, pigeons nest on the outer sill, cooing and complaining at all hours of the day and night. In the summertime, I stand on the edge of the sink and try to open the window because I have no air-conditioner and am trying to create a cross-breeze, but it’s been painted shut. There is a small bathroom and large closet off the kitchen, and because there is no ventilation, my clothes always smell like whatever I’ve cooked the night before. The living/bed room has dark hardwood floors and a brick wall. Two narrow windows with cast-iron burglar bars face out onto 82 Street. East River Park is only a half-block away, but I am young and in the city to escape the quiet and trees, so I steer clear of it.
The neighborhood is filled with wealthy old women and singles bars. Aside from the occasional Sloe Gin Fizz after work, I don’t drink, and I have no interest in meeting the slurry, after-work business types that hang out on the Upper East Side. Everything I want is three trains away—downtown, West Side.

I borrow money from my mother and buy a blue floral sleep-away loveseat. I ask her to ship my piano and boxes of childhood mementos, and she does. I nail my old Barbra Streisand posters to the brick wall and place my stacks of movie magazines on top of the piano.

I have a two-year lease, my dog Bogie, and a renewed determination by my 19th birthday, which I celebrate with take-out Chinese and Casablanca on cable. My mother calls to tell me she has sent me a card with a check inside—a thousand dollars. My aunt calls to see how I am doing and to remind me that I can always go home if things don’t work out. I snuggle up with Bogie and fall asleep, cocooned in hot pink dreams.
The Fives

The Fives is located at 555 West 57th Street, on the corner of 11th Avenue and directly across from the CBS building and below a car dealership. My bosses are Nicky Troiano and John Aniston. John is a regular on a CBS soap and drops in and out throughout the week, spending most of his days across the street at the studio, shooting. He’s going through a friendly divorce, and his wife, a commercial actress, occasionally drops by with his young daughter, Jennifer, whose destiny is already set out there in the stars, though, of course, we don’t know it yet.

Nick, who pity-hired me, is Greek, tan, with a playful twinkle in his eye and a gold chain around his neck. He is a hair dresser when he’s not at the club and is prone to running his fingers through my bangs to fluff them this way or that. He is friendly, but distracted and spends little time at the restaurant.

When neither owner is around, Elizabeth, or “Betty,” the day manager, is in charge. Her daughter Kathy works as an assistant for Tom Brokaw and pops in and out for food and chat several times a day. Betty is plump, with badly bleached hair and a friendly face. She sits all day at a table in the back, complaining about her achy legs. When it’s slow in the restaurant, we hang out with her, talking about our dreams or listening to gossip about John and his soon-to-be ex-wife. We all want to be famous, and John is the closest thing to a real celebrity around here.

Gigi and Andrea are my favorite bartenders, but Gigi is under suspicion and will soon be fired for stealing from the register. Several years later, when she and I have lost touch, I hear sad
news about her from a ballet dancer I’m in class with. Sometime in the late 80s, she was shot in the head during a messy drug deal and ended up spending months in a coma before she died. I find it hard to believe to this day and still look twice when I hear anyone say the name, “Gigi,” just in case the dancer was wrong.

Andrea, a former Playboy Bunny, is a petite, honey-blond model who lives in Yonkers and is frequently late for work. Elizabeth yells at her, and she yells back about the traffic and how much extra work she does around the bar and how she shouldn’t be chastised for arriving a few minutes late every now and then when she has worked three doubles already in the past week and is the first one to pick up shifts when her co-workers have an audition. They go at it like this every day, but it’s all for show. Elizabeth loves Andrea, who, like her, is Italian and a natural hollerer. A few years later, Andrea will become one of the first MTV stars as the lead singer of a group called, “The Flirts,” singing lead on the song, “Don’t Put Another Dime in the Jukebox.” My friendship with her will eventually lead to my own recording contract with Bobby Orlando’s disco factory, Bobcat Records, and my own international hit dance single, “Take a Chance (on Me),” though neither of us sing disco music or entertain recording aspirations yet.

My best customer is “Mr. G,” the weatherman. He has lunch at the same time every day, sits alone at the same table, orders the same food (a hamburger patty with no bun, one piece of lettuce, and a tomato, with mustard, and a Seltzer with lime), and always leaves a decent tip. The chef, in the weatherman’s honor, is also called, “Mr. G,” dubbed so by Elizabeth, who is the only person at The Fives who can get a smile out of him. He is an ancient overweight Asian man who sweats profusely beneath his white paper hat. He yells all day. We are all terrified of him. When we make a mistake and put our order chits in the wrong place, he slides them into the last position, and our customers have to wait to get their food. If we dare to ask about the missing
order, he throws his spatula and screams profanities in Chinese, berating us through the door for several minutes after we leave the kitchen.

The lunch customers are mostly CBS folks in a hurry to get back to the set, and the delay irritates them and makes them glower at us or leave without paying or without tipping. If a customer sends back an undercooked burger, Mr. G burns it to a crisp then hands it back to us with an evil smile. If the customer sends it back again, our legs tremble as we push through the kitchen door. Mr. G takes any criticism personally and assaults us with curses and accusing glares while he recooks an order. This makes for a very nerve-wracking shift.

At night, the restaurant turns into a cabaret where singers and comics showcase their talents to an invited audience that pays a cover at the door and must order a minimum of two drinks within a 45 minute period. We push through the tables to get our drink orders in before the start of the show, then dodge the spotlight and whisper during the performance to get the second order delivered to the table without disturbing the performer.

Sometimes, the performer is famous. Fame star Irene Cara hosts a show one night, as does the jazz and R&B singer, Phyllis Hyman. The comedienne Pudgy is a regular and performs every few months at The Fives. My favorite gay waiter Mark and I befriend her and her husband, Mike (who, in spite of being married and the father of a baby boy, is openly gay), and whenever they are in town, we all go out together after the show, dropping in on closed parties or having drinks at swanky after-hours clubs. Pudgy is sharp-witted and dangerous onstage, slinging hilariously personal barbs at the audience and wait staff alike, but in real life, offstage, relaxing with Mike and friends, she is a pussycat. Still, I am painfully shy around her, afraid to open my mouth and draw attention to my Texas accent and youthful ignorance.
On Friday nights, The Fives is converted into a Jamaican disco. We wiggle our way through the rowdy crowd with trays of fruity alcohol and use sign language to communicate in the deafening noise. Jamaican night is strictly cash and carry, and we add a dollar to the price of each drink for our tip. The club is located in the building’s basement and has no windows, so the disco ball and stage lights are the only source of illumination at night. The space is small, and the line to get in snakes around 11th Avenue. The air cannot circulate, and the bodies are pressed tight against each other, so I end up dirty-dancing my way into the crowd, a deer-in-the-headlight smile pasted on my face all night, my ears stuffed with shredded bar naps and the mingling smells of sweat, sloe gin, body odor and thick cologne making me dizzy and head-achy. Still, as painful as Friday nights are, we never turn down a Jamaican disco shift because the money we make pushing cocktails to anonymous faces trumps the money we make carrying trays of food all day, and there is no “Mr. G” to make our lives miserable. Besides, on Friday nights, we have a secret weapon — blow. Gig or Mark take coke orders from the staff then call their dealers for a delivery drop-off. We line up at the service area to hand over our 50 bucks and pocket our tiny envelopes of powdered euphoria, and the next thing we know, the night is done, and we’re heading out to an after-hours club to dance or score free coke by befriending idiots who talk too much.

One night, we’re dancing after hours at The Ritz (now Webster Hall) when Gigi collapses on the dance floor. We carry her upstairs to the VIP lounge until the ambulance comes. At St. Vincent’s Hospital, she’s given IV fluids for dehydration while we sit by her bedside. On the way out, we run into Grace Jones and her entourage in the hallway. From the look of her, I’m guessing she’d collapsed on a dance floor somewhere, too.
Since my ill-fated cabaret performance at The Fives, the only singing I’ve done has been after closing time at the club or at drop-in piano bars throughout the city. My pianist, Bill, had taken a shine to Andrea during our one night empty room fiasco, and now he makes a point to drop by the bar a few times a week, courting her with gifts of lingerie and perfume. She’s adept at flirtation and manages to keep the presents coming without promising anything she won’t deliver. She makes it clear to Bill that she has a boyfriend but that she’d like to be “friends.” He interprets this as an opening in the wall and continues to stop by whenever she’s working to hang out and flirt with her at the bar. He’s friendly to me when I see him, but there’s no particular interest in pursuing a friendship, so I smile and wave at him when we run into each other, but I mostly stay out of his way. At 29, he’s 11 years my senior, and I don’t know why I’m bothered by his attentions toward my friend Andrea, but the sight of him showing up with gifts for her always irritates me a bit, though I’m careful not to show it.

One night, Andrea asks if I’m available to do a singing gig with her at the Playboy Club in Great Gorge. She’s friends with a group of guys in Yonkers who have a garage band called, “Good ‘n Plenty,” and they’ve booked the upcoming weekend at the private ski resort, but they promised the club, frequented mostly by wealthy businessmen and their families, at least two female lead singers. The gig pays $100, plus a free overnight stay, all we can eat, and complimentary ski lift passes. Andrea says she’ll do all the driving, as it’s mid-winter, and the roads are covered in snow and ice. I’m a little embarrassed and nervous at the thought of performing at a Playboy Club, but I jump at the chance to get paid for singing again, and for the next week, I’m a band singer, rehearsing evenings in Yonkers and waitressing by day in Manhattan.
On the night of our gig, we settle into our complimentary room upstate and are offered coke by the boys in the band. I sniff a line or two before we go onstage, and for the next few hours, Andrea and I, dressed in spandex micro-minis, our hair teased upside-down and shellacked into stiff, wavy boards, pretend to be rock stars. When the performance is over, we eat our complimentary meals in the lounge, then change into snowsuits and head for the slopes, where Andrea skis all day while I sip hot chocolate in the bunny lodge. We drive back into Manhattan and head to work without having slept. I later learn that the lines of “coke” we sniffed with the band were actually something called “Crystal.” I think it’s a pretty-sounding name.

After several more misspent months at The Fives, I decide it’s time to get serious about my career. Gigi’s gone, and Andrea has landed a contract with a dance record label and is only working part-time now. Short on cash and tired of parking tickets, I’ve sold my Toyota to Betty, who presented it to her daughter as a gift. The car had only lasted a week before the transmission needed to be replaced, and since that time, I’ve been on Betty’s shit list.

I turn in my notice and sign up for an acting class at The Actor’s Playhouse in the Village. No more blow. No more all-nighters. My early morning class will be three days a week, and I’ll be expected to perform onstage in weekly showcases. I’ve spent most of my car money on the course and the next month’s rent, and I am fully expecting to get an agent from one of the showcases and then proceed to landing a part in a Broadway musical. This is my plan.
Andy hates New York. He lies all day on the green velvet sofa in my tiny one bed-room walk-up on St. Mark’s Place watching episodes of “Cops,” which he loves. He has memorized the theme song, “Bad Boys,” and hums it absentmindedly during commercial breaks and when he is in the shower.

“Bad boys, bad boys

Vatcha gonna do?

Vatcha gonna do ven dey come for you”

“Oprah,” makes him crazy with indignation.

“Mein Got!” he screams at the set, “How can people say such tings in public? Why must zey speak of such tings in vront of ze entire veld? For vat reason?”

I laugh at his outrage and remind him we are Americans. We are free to speak about anything we like, anywhere we like. Even if it embarrasses our families. Even if it embarrasses uptight Germans visiting on a visa. I say these things, but inside I feel a bit of shame at our – well, shamelessness.

“Buck!” is his favorite new word. It is the word he hears most—on the street, in the shops, on television—in America. He pronounces it like a dirty word.
“Only a BUCK!” he mocks, passing the street vendors selling hot dogs, pretzels, sodas.

“Two BUCKS!” he shouts, as we pass a t-shirt stand. “Forty BUCKS!” he corrects the television ad that is selling a kitchen gadget set for only $39.99 to those who call now.

Commercials are another American horror to Andy. A musician, he is outraged watching The Tonight Show when, after Jay Leno’s fast-talking, inane interview with some young Hollywood male starlet, the jazz band finally begins play, and is immediately interrupted by a station break.

“Vat is ze point of dis? How can zey start ze muzik and zen play a commercial advertisement?! Why are you not angry at zis?”

He’s right, but I’d never thought of it before. In Germany, the few commercials that do air occur only at the end of a broadcast and do not interrupt the programming. It has never occurred to me that we were missing anything by the cut-aways. I’ve always thought of the music as transitional—part of the formula—rather than integral to the show. But the interviews give Andy a headache. He is not familiar with most of the guests, and they speak too fast, anyway. He is translating, always translating in his head, I must remember—looking for understanding, trying to make the appropriate associations to “get” the humor, which, more often than not, is crude or very American and beyond explanation to my newly arrived German boyfriend.

He speaks six languages fluently, not including Music, which is its own universal language. He is fluent in Music wherever he goes, and it is Music that has brought us together, Music that has brought him across the sea to my dirty tenement building on the Lower East Side, where the experience of immigration, the shock of America, in all its carefree materialism and
unabashed narcissism has replayed like a stubborn melody again and again for well over a hundred years by past and present families of “huddled masses” living in this building and thousands of others nearby. The disillusionment is in the bricks.

We met the year before, when I was playing Crissy in the 1992 International Bus and Truck of Hair. After four months of gray and bitter cold, traveling 7-10 hours every day throughout Europe and Scandinavia, sleeping with my legs curled up or draped across the metal arm of a bus seat, performing barefoot in sold-out stadiums and 300 year-old Bavarian village theaters with little or no heat backstage, singing Let the Sun Shine in with cast members who had grown, through too-close proximity, to hate each other off-stage, I was ready for love when April—and Herr Andreas Puhl—arrived.

He had come to fill in for our British musical director, Noel, who was flying back to New York for a week to audition performers for the next leg of the tour. He introduced himself to us in broken English onstage at sound check, and then he proceeded to test the microphones, spitting German numbers into each one while our Polish sound man adjusted the levels.

“Eins, eins, eins…Zwei, zwei, zwie, Drei, drei, drei…” and so on, until he reached microphone number six.

“Ja. Sechs ist gut,” he smiled, looking in my direction for one brief, eternal moment, and the crew laughed as he went on. “Sieben, sieben, sieben……”

By the time I returned backstage to my dressing room, I was in a mental fog, my heart was racing and my body was tingling. I looked at my face in the mirror, and I thought, “Ah-oh.”
was in love with a man I’d never met, a German who was leaving in a week and who probably didn’t even speak English. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. It was as if I had fallen under a spell.

Two nights later, the cast goes bowling on our night off in Manheim. I suck at bowling, and twice I release the ball behind me as I’m swinging it. I’m hopeless, and I’m tired. Andy sees that I am leaving and offers to walk me back to the hotel three blocks away. I blush as I look into his eyes, and he notices. We walk side by side and cast a funny shadow under the street-lamps. He is over six feet tall, slightly stooped at the shoulders, with a mess of thick brown-gray hair that reminds me of Beethoven. I am 5 foot 3, thin as a wisp and walk with my hands in the pockets of my leather show jacket—wondering if he would, perhaps, take my hand if it were free.

He makes very little conversation, and the silence between us is not uncomfortable, but seems to hold the possibility of so much. When we arrive at the lobby, he asks if he can accompany me to my door, and I say, “Why not?” We are silent in the elevator and silent as we walk the long hallway to my door. I fumble through my pocket for my key card, and he surprises me by lifting my chin with his hand and kissing me softly on each cheek.

“This is how we say goodnight in Germany,” he says softly. “It was nice to have walked with you home, Tammy.”

“Goodnight, Andreas,” I say, blushing again.

“Andy. You can call me ‘Andy,’” he says over his shoulders as he walks back to the elevator. “It’s like American, no? Johnny, Barbie, Cathy, Debbie, Jerry, Tommy, Tammy, Andy…”
I lie awake all night, too excited to sleep, willing the morning to come so I can see him again. I fall asleep at dawn and awaken to frantic knocking on the door. I am late. The bus is ready to leave. It’s a travel day, and we will spend the next several hours crossing the country to a small town near the Austrian border. I drag my suitcase into the elevator and toss it into the cargo hold of the bus, looking anxiously around for any sign of Andy. The musicians have already left, it turns out, sharing rides in their own private cars. They’ll reach the hotel hours before us, traveling the Autobahn at 100 MPH and stopping to pee behind trees alongside the road.

I feel trapped and disappointed, and I wonder if Andy is thinking of me.

The bus breaks down, and after it is fixed, we are forced to travel straight to the theater. There are crowds of teenagers with colorful peace signs painted on their faces already lined up outside. They scream and wave and chase the bus as we lumber into the parking lot. When the show is over, they sing outside our dressing room windows and line up for autographs beside the bus. The orchestra is onstage with us throughout the show, so I have seen him, but only as Crissy. I hang back a bit as the cast leaves by the stage door, greeting the exuberant fans outside. The musicians are packing up their instruments and laughing at something Andy has said in German. They don’t notice me as they wave their goodbyes and head out to the parking lot. Andy looks up as he crosses the stage to the hallway where I am standing. Our eyes meet and lock, and then his arms are around me. We stand like this, wrapped in an electric, tender embrace, for a frozen moment in time that may have lasted a second or five minutes. I don’t know. When at last we separate our bodies and look into each other’s eyes, it seems we have been standing like this for many lifetimes.
“We must go to the hotel,” he whispers, shrugging, and I nod. The spell is broken, and we are strangers again—but strangers who are now tied to each other in a way that neither of us can begin to comprehend.

One of the musicians sticks his head through the stage door and calls out to Andy, then mumbles something in German when he sees us looking at each other.

“Ja, comme,” Andy says, then he takes my hand and squeezes it before hurrying through the door.

I don’t remember the bus ride to the hotel. My body is on the noisy bus, but my soul is somewhere far away, and I’m quite certain there was a silly smile on my face. Then we’re at the hotel—a quaint yellow B&B with a courtyard and a fountain. It is late—near midnight—and our troupe has descended upon the quiet lobby with laughter, shouts, complaints and song. The old woman running the front desk hates us—particularly the “ugly Americans”—we’re rude, self-absorbed, demanding, and we’re wearing tie-dye. She scowls at us as we line up to get our keys, arguing over who gets which room and who has to share with whom tonight. The hotel is too small, and there aren’t enough rooms. Some people will have to triple bunk—this after a long day on the road and no supper before the show. I look around for Andy, but he’s nowhere to be seen, so I take my key and head up the steps. I am unpacking my bag when the door opens, and the Polish bass player walks in using a key.

“No!” he says, shaking his head. “This is my room.”

“This is the key the lady gave me,” I say.

“Forget it,” he says, exhausted and annoyed. “I am not leaving. This room is mine.”
I consider pointing out that I was here first and arguing for my right to stay, but then I think about Andy and realize that Fate may have just intervened on my behalf. I pull my suitcase by the handle and bump it back down the staircase and into the lobby.

He is there—across the room, and he sees me.

“What, is there a problem?” he asks, taking my suitcase and pulling it back up the steps.

“Follow me.”

I tell him about the mix-up, and he listens and nods as we arrive at his door. He turns the key and motions for me to go inside first.

“You are safe here,” he smiles. “You can sleep on the bed. I will sleep on the floor.”

But when he closes the door and turns to me, I find myself in his arms, kissing his lips, stroking his hair. He takes my hand and lowers me onto the twin mattress, and we undress each other as we kiss, then lie in each other’s arms, stroking, kissing, pleasing each other until the first rays of daylight through the window cover our sleeping, peaceful bodies.

This was how it started—a beautiful, complicated romance between two people who could barely understand each other, on the other side of the globe. Things had been lovely, then complicated. Sacrifices were made, contracts broken, parents left behind, friends and lovers abandoned. Now he is here—hating my world, morose, bitter, homesick and unemployed.

He is a musician at home—a concert pianist, conductor, musical director, keyboardist. Here, he is just a German. I come home one afternoon to find him crying in front of the TV set, his head in his hands.
“Why did you not tell me there was such hatred for Germans here?” he asked. “Why do they hate us so? Everywhere, we are the butt of jokes—our accent, our manner……”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, but I knew. And I was surprised that he had not realized it before—that the evils of World War II, the holocaust, Hitler, the Nazis——were the first things that came to mind when people heard a German accent, that there was no forgiving here—only a necessary turning away from the reality of that horror through satire and gross characterization. We had to laugh at German people in film and on television—had to punish them still by dressing them in shiny boots and tiny mustaches and then pointing at them as buffoons and laughing. He was no more a Nazi sympathizer than I was a proponent of slavery or racism, but he was from Germany, and I was from the South. He felt bullied by the portrayal of his countrymen in American media, at the injustice of being forever blamed for something he did not cause.

I knew it was over before we loaded up my Honda Civic and drove south on February 26—downtown on the West Side Drive, through the Holland Tunnel and Hoboken, past Jersey City and onto the turnpike on our way to warmer, greener Nashville. Ahead of us lay dreams we would never fulfill together, plans we would abandon. Behind us that day, the fabric of the world we had known began its slow rip as Ramzi Yousef drove a stolen Ryder truck filled with 1500 pounds of fertilizer-based urea nitrate out of Jersey City, past Hoboken, through the Holland Tunnel and into the second level of the underground parking lot in Tower One of the World Trade Center.
Vanishing Twin Syndrome (VTS), also known as “fetal reabsorption” is a freaky natural phenomenon wherein a twin pregnancy becomes a single pregnancy when one embryo dies and is absorbed into its living twin. Also known as “twin embolization syndrome,” the event is thought to occur in one of eight multi-gestational pregnancies. Although the phenomenon was first discovered in 1945, it wasn’t until ultrasound technology made it possible to peek inside the womb, starting with the 1980s, that scientists were able to study the syndrome.

Usually, when the dead twin is completely absorbed into its living counterpart, the pregnancy and delivery are normal, and there are no signs of distress in the living fetus. Sometimes, though, the dead twin is only partially absorbed and becomes flattened, like a piece of parchment, attaching itself to the living twin’s skull or body like a sticky note. When this happens, the dead, paper-thin twin is called “fetus papyruses,” and it can complicate delivery by blocking the mother’s cervix –barring the living twin’s exit into life. According to researchers, VTS may be caused by any number of factors, including a poorly implanted placenta, a developmental anomaly, or a chromosome abnormality that renders the vanishing twin “incompatible with life.” (D. Pelega; A. Ferber; R. Orvieto; I. Bar-Hava, 1988)
Today is my father’s birthday—October 18. He would have been 79. I post a comment on my uncle’s Facebook wall, above cheerful greetings from my cousins.

“Happy birthday—Hope it’s a fun one!”

The post is not meant as an accusation. But I have to consider the possibility that it will be read as one. Family communication can be tricky.

I insert an emoticon heart, tapping the “less than” symbol, followed by the number 3 and the Enter button—an afterthought; a way of suggesting an “I love you,” as ambiguous as I can be without feeling or seeming foolish or needy. It completes the too-short, too-enthusiastic posting like a peck on the cheek, casual, friendly, undemanding.

I click through the photo album on my uncle’s page. The most recent pictures were posted, according to his timeline, in January of 2011. He doesn’t Facebook much. But he’s 79, and I’m impressed that he uses the medium at all.

My father would have loved the whole Facebook thing. I think.

The images show him heavier, grayer—but still very much alive, laughing, mugging for the camera with my cousins and their grown children, his grandchildren, who I haven’t seen since they were in feetie pajamas. They are standing side by side with their arms outstretched—a chorus line of generations in New Year’s Eve bowler hats, fat cigars gripped theatrically between each one’s teeth. They look giddy, silly. I click on one of the pictures and open it up to full size, zooming in to get a closer look at my uncle’s face—heavily lined, tan. His thick, silver hair is the same as my father’s had been the last time I saw him, in 1999, at my wedding. But my
uncle’s hair back then had been a rich chestnut brown, only slightly speckled with silver, his face still handsome and smooth. If my uncle had been at the wedding, people who didn’t know my father had a twin would not have been able to guess it, and those who did know and had not seen them for a while would have been alarmed. Twenty years on lithium had taken its toll on my father. The brothers were, by that time, as non-identical on the outside as they had always been on the inside. Strangers would not have mistaken one for the other if they had come across the pair in the same place. By then, though, my father and my uncle were rarely in the same place at the same time.

My father had made the trip to my now sister-in-law’s house in Chestnut Hill, a suburb of Philadelphia, along with my step-mother. It was the first time he had ever traveled to the Northeast, though I had been living in New York City for 19 years. The day before the wedding, he helped hang decorations and blow up purple and white helium balloons in the sunroom, avoiding awkward conversation with my mother by aligning himself with my most recent (and soon to be ex) step-father. Alternately jittery and enraptured, I flitted through the stately house like an excited bee, checking on caterers, supervising tent placement in the garden and trying to quell the rising terror and doubt. Having both of my parents and a full set of step-parents in the same house was novel, comforting even, but my mind was too unquiet to appreciate the enormity of my father’s gesture, and by the time he offered me his tuxedoed arm to walk me through the garden and past the smiling faces of friends, co-workers and new and old family the next evening, I had hardly spoken more than a few sentences to him. His hands shook when he gave me away.

At the reception, we danced to *The Tennessee Waltz* in front of everyone, and he stepped on my toes, blushing and whispering in my ear, “A waltz? I don’t know how to waltz!” I had
chosen the song because my mother had told me it was always his favorite. The rest of the night was a blur—cheers, toasts, songs, tears, more dancing, eating, lots of drinking. At some point, I removed my tight ankle strap shoes and tossed the train of my gown over my arm as I moved from room to room with a glass of champagne in my hand, barefoot, drunk and, at 36, finally a bride.

I caught glimpses of my father in the hours that followed, standing off to one side of the room and holding my step-mother’s bag while she danced with my step-father, struggling through polite conversations with the Philadelphia and New York crowd—my husband’s family and my theatre friends, eating cake, listening to the musicians. Then he was gone—back to his hotel for the night and an early flight home to Texas the next morning.

I study the screen. My uncle is finally showing his age. I wonder if my father might have put on the pounds, too, and if his face would have turned jowly and red like the face in the photo. I try to picture my father, always slight of build, with a paunch. Thanks to the picture, I don’t have to use much imagination. There he is, if I squinch up my mind just right, chewing on a fat cigar, smiling, slightly drunk, gray, overweight, but alive. For a moment, I mentally insert myself, my husband, my son, now 11, my daughter, 7, my half-sister and brother and their kids, my nieces and nephews, into the photograph, trying to trick myself into an alternate reality. But the people in the photo are not us, and this is not my father.

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, a predisposition to bipolar disorder (BPD) is considered by scientist to be mostly genetic in origin, but research on twins suggests that the illness can remain latent for years or even a lifetime,
manifesting only when some event tips the brain’s delicate balance. Their BPD FAQ Web page (“FAQs on Bipolar Disorder.”, 2010) explains:

"... if one identical twin has bipolar disorder, there’s approximately a 70% chance that the other twin will eventually develop the illness, as well...However, if the condition were caused entirely by genes, we'd expect all identical twins of people with bipolar disorder to develop the illness. The fact that this doesn't occur demonstrates the existence and importance of other... variables which can either precipitate bipolar disorder or serve as protective factors in people who are genetically “at risk”...Research... also suggest that trauma or stressful life events can trigger an episode of bipolar disorder in people who are genetically vulnerable.”

My uncle and my father were, at least for the first 30 years of their lives, identical on the outside—that is, their features were mirrored in one another. There were nearly imperceptible differences—a stubborn cowlick that my father had to consistently comb to one side, a left eyelid that fell just a smidgen lower over my father’s eye, giving him a slightly dreamier expression. Otherwise, their features—chiseled narrow faces with high cheekbones, hazel eyes, blonde-brown hair—were the same. They were short for Texas country boys—only 5ft.7 by the time they were fully grown in the late 1950s—but they were fit and handsome, fresh-faced with easy, good-natured grins, like a pair of Tab Hunters.

My grandmother did what proud mothers of twin boys always did at the time—she dressed them in identical clothing, gave them the same Christmas and birthday presents every year, sent them into the world each day as two halves of a whole unit. She referred to them as, “the boys,” and always balanced remarks about one with an equal commentary on the other. Photos in her albums showed two infants in matching white gowns, caps and booties; four-year-olds on Halloween, dressed in pin-striped Zoot suits, their wide-banded fedoras dipped at identical angles over practiced Hollywood gangster scowls, costume machine guns pointed at the
camera; 8 year-old cowboys dressed in boots and spurs, chaps, fringe vests and white hats, two Lone Rangers, perched side-by-side on top of a wooden corral fence; teens posed on the same fence years later, blue jeans cuffed, white bobby socks and clunky saddle shoes, their expressions a practiced cool, hand-rolled cigarettes drooping casually on top of each unsmiling bottom lip, bookended James Deans in letter jackets; a yellowed newspaper clipping of identical 19 year-old sailors in Navy whites standing beside the giant captain’s wheel on board an aircraft carrier, looking earnest in their Dixie cup hats; another news clipping showing the pair of returned GIs, muscled and tanned in matching Hawaiian shirts, proudly signing registration forms at Sam Houston University.

This is where their lives will split—in their mid-twenties, several years older than most of the students, newly returned from Guam, the “boys” in the college photo now men. This is where my parents met and married, where my uncle met my aunt, who was my mother’s suite mate. A swap occurred—my mother first going out on a date with my uncle, then recommending him to my aunt when she fell for the sweeter, shyer twin.

My mother left school shortly after marrying my father. She worked as a secretary while he completed his undergraduate degree. She had already suffered a miscarriage and was pregnant with me when my father went to work as an accountant for the IRS. Her father, a union organizer for the steel workers, became very ill and died of cirrhosis of the liver shortly before I was born. During his last hospitalization, my mother had taken off work a few times to visit him. When she returned to her office at the FBI the day after his funeral, her boss promptly fired her. She begged to keep her job and assured him she would not have to miss any more days, since her father was now dead. Her bosses response, “Yeah, but next it’ll be your mother,” silenced my mother, who
emptied her desk, packed her belongings and called my father for an early ride home in the tiny Austen-Heely.

Already poor, my parents were reduced to living on saltine crackers, peanut butter and tomato soup after my mom lost her job. My father had purchased a simple WPA house with a GI bill loan, a half-hour outside of his office in downtown Houston and a few blocks away from my maternal grandmother, now widowed. My uncle had remained at Sam Houston to pursue his law degree and my pregnant aunt worked and attended school part-time. My cousin Suzie was born one month before me, and when my father mother visited my paternal grandmother’s house a few weeks after I was born, Suzie slept in a bassinet, and I was placed inside a blanket-lined bottom dresser drawer.

I have a miniscule creased black and white glossy photo that shows the twin families—my father in a gray suit and a narrow tie, my mother in pedal pushers, ballet flats and a Peter Pan-collared top, her hair styled like Jackie Kennedy’s, in a flip, a blanketed bundle in her arms. Beside them stands my uncle, in pleated tan kakis and a pressed t-shirt. He’s holding my cousin Suzie upright for the camera, and my aunt stands slightly behind him in a homemade cotton dress. Everyone is smiling, young. One year later, an hour and a half up the highway, President Kennedy was assassinated as he sat beside his beautiful wife, waving at the cheering crowd that had lined the procession route that day in Dallas. Two years later, my father returned home from work one day to find that my mother and I were gone. Perplexed, he walked through the house, looking for a note or missing suitcase or anything that might explain the emptiness. Everything was the same, only quieter. My mother had taken nothing—no clothing, toys, photographs—nothing but me. We never came back.
My children never got to meet their grandfather. They have never laughed at his silliness, never squealed at his spooky stories, never played “snipe hunt,” in his front yard in Texas, squatting in the dark, shining a flashlight into the opening of a paper bag, calling, “Here, snipe, snipe, snipe…” until he sneaked up out of the inky woods and scared the bejeezus out of them. They will never know, as I did, the joy of relief or mock anger at the man who would have driven them to the rural Texas bottoms, where the trees grow toward each other across the red dirt road, where it is “so dark at night,” he would have told them, “that you cannot see your hand in front of your face.”

If he had lived, he would have driven them to this spooky place—the place near my grandmother’s home, where as boys, he and my uncle had ridden their horses after dark whenever they were bored and in need of a thrill, where he had so many times driven me and my cousins during our summer vacations, where many healing years after, he had driven his new children by his second wife—he would have, I imagine, brought my children here, telling them stories about restless spirits that haunted the place—murdered Indians and other wrongfully afflicted souls. He would have told them about the strange balls of light that would crossed the creek and hover above the road, looking “for all intents and purposes like a severed head looking for its body.” Then he would have pretended to have car trouble, killing the engine and flicking the lights off and on and then off again. He would have admonished them to “stay put,” with the doors locked while he walked the two miles back to the highway to hitch a ride into town and back again with a mechanic. They would have huddled together just like we always did in the dark, trembling in fear as they watched him disappear into the darkness. They would have spoken to each other in hushed tones, maybe sung a song for comfort, and they would have
jumped at the sound of every falling pine needle or hoot owl screech for what would have seemed like an hour, though it would have been only minutes. Then, no doubt, they would have collectively wet their pants when their grandfather surprised them with a loud, “Aaaaargh!” as he jumped from the darkness and slapped at the windshield like a boogie man on the attack.

My children are not afraid to go to sleep in their own rooms. They are not afraid of the dark. But then, they never knew my father. A year and four months after my wedding, a few weeks before my son was born, my father wrote my step-mother a note to let her know where he would be, then he loaded the Colt 22 he used for target practice and had always referred to as his “can-killer” —a pretty six shooter, Western-style, silver-inlaid, with swirly decorative etchings and a mother-of-pearl handle—and he drove to his favorite fishing hole by the lake.

My children never knew their grandfather, and they don’t know much about him. They know that he was funny and that he loved to fish, loved to jump his Bass boat over submerged roots in the lake, that he had been a cartoonist at one time, had even had a few of his drawings published in the Navy newspaper, that he was good with numbers and great at telling stories, that he got a kick out of scaring kids and could make you laugh even when you were a little mad at him. They know that he looked exactly like their great uncle—the mayor of a small town in Texas—someone they have met twice. But they know very little about his life and nothing about his illness or death.

Suicide silences commemoration. It removes the tales of those left behind. Every expression and nuance, every funny story, every accomplishment or admirable trait you would like to share is muffled in a lie or an apology for the answer that waits—the story’s ending—a note and a body by the lake. Who wants to talk about that? How do you read children a story
with missing pages? How to make sense of the paragraphs preceding the words, “The End,”—words which lie, perhaps, on an invisible sticky note attached to my aging, overweight, smiling, living uncle? My father’s story cannot be told to children, so we stay silent. We live; his twin lives; his nieces, nephews, grandchildren live, and he does not. Something inside my father—some latently triggered chromosome, perhaps—was ultimately incompatible with life, and he vanished. His story has dissolved and been absorbed into our own.
The Gene Pool

Adrift

Sometimes it’s the little things that break you. In the midst of crisis and chaos, I hold firm. The captain of my little four person boat, I am accustomed to steering through the storms. My shoulders are broad; my resolve unlimited. Determined against the mountainous waves, I use fear as a belly fire, fueling my journey like so much steam. I rely on no one. My husband and supposed co-pilot has depth perception issues that keep him quivering in the aft, one arm around our youngest (9), the other clutching a useless, damp map. My son is 13. He is oblivious to the storm, building digital block cities inside his perpetual headphones.

The news is hideous—has been for months. Still, I fall asleep each night with the television on and wake each morning to new horror—disappearing planes, falling planes, angry passengers, war, beheadings, global warming weather catastrophes…you know the rest. It feels apocalyptic.

This morning, I snap it off on the way to the bathroom, mentally shooting the finger at the stiffly-groomed and thickly-powdered messenger. Shut up. Too much. Never ends. Don’t want to hear it. Don’t care today.

This morning, I feel strong, having almost adjusted to the new routine. Up at 6:30, in the shower, dress, brush my teeth, and gently knock on Katie’s door.

Five more minutes, Mom.

Okay, I say. Five more, but then I want you out of bed and in the bathroom, brushing your teeth, okay? We have to leave soon.

Okay.

So far, so good...I flip through my daughter’s closet in search of a loose-fitting shirt and leggings – her new uniform. Comfortable, non-descript. No heavy metal logos, beer ads, curse words, or skulls allowed—not even the cute little pink ones on her new backpack. She can’t bring it, anyway. No zippers. No drawstrings. No stuff.

I place the clothes on her bed then head downstairs to find her shoes, praying the puppy hasn’t eaten them. I remember her joy on Friday at telling me she made it through the whole day without having to remove them once.

I got to keep my shoes on the whole day!
These new goals and pleasures put other sucky things – the $2500 camper that’s history after two camping trips, my son missing four days of 8th grade because of a virus, the armless chairs and sofas that we will not even try to replace until the puppy outgrows her beaver stage, my 74 year-old quadruple-divorced mother’s latest romance woes, being three weeks behind in my graduate classes – into perspective.

She kept her shoes. I cannot complain.

Losing shoes is bad. Losing shoes means you don’t get to go outside for recess. It means you were trouble. Possibly dangerous. Non-compliant, defiant.

I pick up a pair of balled up socks the puppy has been chewing on.

Socks!

Forgot to put them on her twice last week, and both times, she had to remove her shoes. Mommy fail. They gave her too-big, gray, generic ones with grip pads on the bottom. She likes them.

I place the socks on the kitchen table and start to pour Katie a bowl of cereal, but she yells down the stairs that she’d really like to have toasted potato rolls this morning. I shrug and wonder where this idea came from, dig through the bread drawer and find a lone slice of potato bread with a tiny chunk taken out of the corner. I pop it into the toaster, then pour Katie a glass of O.J. in a plastic cup she can carry with her.

We have a very long drive, and I realize now we’re running a bit late, as usual. I hear singing and the sound of water running full blast from the bathroom above the kitchen. I yell up to Katie to hurry. We’re late. She says she’s coming – just has to wash her hands first. I know she’s already been washing them for quite some time, but I don’t’ have the energy right now. Too many battles to choose from lately.

She bounces down the steps chattering about her plans for a cooking show and recipes she has invented that will help her win Master Chef when she’s older. She says she could have won Master Chef, Jr. if I had taught her how to cook when she was three or four instead of waiting until she was eight. Now, because of my negligence, she will have to wait until she is 18 to enter, which is actually okay because that gives her plenty of time to refine her recipes, including the one she invented yesterday, which is currently in the freezer in four tiny ramekins—microwaved marshmallow with sugar stars and chocolate syrup on top, frozen. Now I know what was all over the refrigerator handle.

I wet a paper towel and wipe down the handle, then wipe down the Martha –our word for the French white butcher block kitchen island we bought at Kmart a hundred years ago and painted purple and green to match our whimsical color scheme. The kitchen remains whimsical, though filthy, still, even though we pulled out the dropped ceiling in a burst of impulsive renovation.
enthusiasm in 2007 and then realized the actual ceiling had been removed by one of the previous owners to repair a plumbing leak.

That was seven years ago, and our whimsical purple and green kitchen still has no ceiling. We keep our eyes trained from the cabinet tops down and pretend we live in a normal house. To tell the truth, we don’t even notice the moldy beams and hodgepodge repaired pipes anymore. We don’t see what’s missing except on the rare occasion when we have visitors. Then we stammer in shushed tones about the plumbing incident, as though it just happened and pray the kids don’t overhear and out us to our guests.

Katie asks for her potato roll, and I ask her if she’d like butter. She doesn’t hear me. Her mind is far away as she sits at the table, drawing imaginary circles on the pine. I ask again.

Nothing.

I put the toasted potato bread on a plate and place it on the table in front of her, along with the orange juice.

*I wanted hot chocolate.*

Katie, you know you can’t have chocolate before school.

*Then let me have a coke.*

Nope—nothing sugary on a school day. Drink your orange juice.

*Fine.*

I hand her a handful of pills, which she swallows on the first try, already an expert after two weeks. I brush away black box warning anxieties and tell myself she’ll be okay. Please, God.

**Abandoning Ship**

My father had been treated for 30 years before the addition of Paxil to his cocktail sent him spiraling. I got the call two weeks before my son’s due date.

*Gunshot through the head. Doctor didn’t see it coming. He seemed fine.*

But I knew. Two weeks prior, talking with him on the phone, I tried to convince him it was *Seasonal Affective Disorder.*

SAD. (Insert bitter chuckle here.)

--that spring would come soon and his first grandson, fishing in the bass boat at the lake.
I got another call and said I’d talk to him soon, but it didn’t happen.

He drove to the lake that last day. Left a note to let my step-mother know where they could find him. Apologized to her and the kids. His handwriting was tiny and square and filled the front and back of the loose leaf notebook page. There were no white spaces in between the letters.

Several crumpled up tries waited in the trashcan. My step-mother found them the next day, abandoned words not quite right.

She’d known, too. Had even hidden the bullets. He drove to a gun shop in the next county to get more because, after 30 years of very public ups and downs, there wasn’t a gun shop or pharmacy left in their area who would sell to him without his wife’s permission.

Had to have been frustrating as hell.

**Rough Seas**

I sit across from Katie and smile. She mopes and picks at the edge of her toast, then shoves it away in disgust.

*I said toasted potato rolls!*

This is a toasted potato roll.

*No. This is a piece of broken toasted potato bread. A potato roll is like a hamburger bun. That’s what I wanted – and more than just one.*

Oh. I didn’t realize we had both. I saw this in the bread drawer, and it was the last one. Anyway, it’s the same thing—just shaped differently.

She humphs and takes a mopey bite, watches me with dark, dilated eyes, then smiles too brightly.

*Wow. My OCD is really acting up right now. I’m having a very disturbing thought about sticking needles into your eyes.*

That *would* be disturbing, I say, then I get up and move to the sink to run the water and pretend I’m not dying inside.
Three weeks ago, she started fourth grade. She had been there a half day when we got the call from the child study team asking us to pick her up immediately and to please not bring her back without a note from her doctor indicating that she was stable.

A trip to the ER that lasted 40 hours yielded no note. Instead, she was transferred by ambulance to a pediatric residential behavioral health facility two hours away, in Pennsylvania. I rode in the back of the ambulance with her, strapped to a board prone beside her gurney. I stroked her hand. She batted me away and told me not to touch her.

Her hair was in pigtails.

She fell asleep, and they rolled her into a room behind a set of locked doors without waking her so I could tell her goodbye. I was holding a plastic bag with her sneakers, but they refused them because they had shoe laces.

Katie says none of this would have happened if her school wasn’t so close to the highway. She just wanted to be alone for a minute—to meditate. She ran from the playground into the nearby woods, and they chased after her—three teachers. Five minutes passed before they found her, sitting on the hill beside the Interstate, her knees drawn up to her chin.

Later, back in class, she was drawing in her notebook when the teacher told her it was time to work. She refused to stop.

*I’m an artist! This is my work!*

She threw something, then sat in the teacher’s chair at the head of the class and refused to budge. She turned upside down and put her feet on the teacher’s desk, crying, sobbing, choking as the class looked on, confused.

Three members of the child study team carried her out of the classroom. One held one leg. One held the other leg. The third one wrapped her arms around Katie’s limp torso.

**S.O.S.**

Well.

It had been coming for a while. We knew things weren’t right—had already made and missed two psych eval appointments over the summer.

The damned camper.
Stranded, twice—the second time for three days in a campground near the amusement park we never got to visit. Had to be rescued by an old family friend the night before the first day of school, leaving our broken camper behind to be dealt with later.

Poor kid was exhausted going in. Should have kept her home, but it was her first day, and she was so excited. My son, being 13, was bummed, but not Katie. She wanted to go, even though she was tired. The summer had been too long—kicked out of her ice skating camp in the third week after refusing to transition from break back to the ice and digging her fingernails into the three counselors who tried to persuade her.

_It’s a liability issue. You understand. If it had been one of the kids, we could have been sued. We love Katie. She’s funny and sweet and talented. We’re really sorry, but we just can’t take the risk. Maybe when she’s more stable she can come back and try again. Maybe she’s coming down with something? You should take her to your doctor and get some blood work done. Could be Lyme. Sometimes Lyme makes you act weird. So many people around here have it._

I nod and smile, holding Katie’s hand. She’s not paying attention. Her group goes by, and she wants to join them, go back on the ice. She pulls, and I clutch. She struggles.

_I’ll be good! I just want to go on the ice, that’s all. I promise. I won’t act up again. I’m fine now. Please._

I look at the counselors. They shake their heads sadly.

I tighten my grip as Katie falls in a heap to the floor, refuses to budge. I try to lift her. She screams and goes limp. I ask her to please get up. She refuses. I look back at the counselors, and they look away, embarrassed, uncomfortable. I whisper gently, tell her we’ll try again another time, when she’s feeling better. She begs. I tell her I’m sorry, but it’s impossible—not my decision. Can’t do anything about it now. Let’s just go home. She weeps and refuses to move from the floor.

I promise her ice cream. She acquiesces, reluctant, but interested.

_Okay, but only if I can have two scoops. Can I have two scoops?_

_An Aside:_ I know you’re judging. I can feel it. The parent of an explosive child would not judge. The child of an explosive parent would not judge. They know the walk – the tippy toe over the eggshells. No, the trembling, terrified tread over the minefield where every shaky step explodes inside your head because you have PTSD from years of previous unintentional detonations. The trauma is the same, explosion or not. The potential is always there, and it is a living, real thing, even if it is only happening inside your head. Your child is a time bomb.
S.O.S.

I nod. I just want to be out of here. Anything. Just get up and come to the car, where I can sit and think. We borrowed money to pay for the extra skating camp session, and she only had one day.

But no.

That isn’t the important part. The important part is what the fuck is wrong with my baby? Lyme?

She’s had it before, at four. Had to pick her up from camp that day, too. Could be Lyme. My husband was diagnosed earlier in the summer.

Maybe Lyme, I tell myself.

I call the doctor to make an appointment for blood work. I take Katie to Sonic for ice cream, and I drink a Diet Coke and eat fries while she chatters happily about her plans to have a Halloween party in October and invite a whole bunch of people. I wonder, but do not ask, who will come to this party, as she had precisely two friends at the beginning of spring, and neither will play with her anymore. She spooked them. Obsessed over them, bossed them, begged them, commanded them to play whether they wanted to or not, then said inappropriate, disgusting things in front of their mothers.

*I used to pick my butt and eat the stuff that was on my finger.*

TMI, Kate. If I were you, I wouldn’t mention this to anyone at school.

Launching off the school bus at the end of the school year, she grins like a Cheshire cat as she greets me on the porch.

*I told everyone on the bus about my gross habit.*

How’d that work out for you, Kate? I don’t say it. Don’t have to.

No one will play with her now. They whisper and giggle when she walks by. They steer clear of her at the lunch table. My poor son is the brother of the girl with the gross habit, and we are the neighborhood Addams Family.

*Did you know they don’t even have a ceiling in their kitchen? And what’s with all the broken campers in their yard?*

But it’s what she doesn’t say that really alienates her. Even from me.

Especially from me.
**Drowning**

She bangs on my door at 3am on a mid-summer’s night, begging to be let in. I look at the clock, then orient myself and open the door, which is locked. She is white with fear, pacing and trembling with equal and competing needs to divulge some horror and not to divulge.

Whatever it is can wait, I say. I’m too sleepy for this. It was just a bad dream. Come sleep with me tonight – just this once. We’ll talk about it tomorrow. It’s okay.

She falls asleep the instant her head hits the pillow, and I lie awake dodging her frantic windmill of lanky arms and legs all night long. She turns completely upside down and rights herself again no less than five times in the next four hours. As the dawn approaches, I give up and stagger into her bedroom to fall across her lumpy twin.

I oversleep by two hours the next day, and she has made French toast and sits on the sofa, covered in powdered sugar. Confectioner’s sugar also powders the *Martha*. I sponge the surface and rinse the sponge in the sink, which is full of dishes.

Screw it. I’m tired. Nobody comes here, anyway.

I join her on the sofa to watch *Gravity Falls*—her latest obsession. She knows every episode backwards and forwards and follows a crazy conspiracy theorist on *YouTube*—a grown man in a fez who has like-minded children across the country convinced that dark secrets lurk beneath the surface of this Disney animated town.

**Another Aside:** Judging again. I feel it. *YOU* try to close the computer on *YouTube* when she’s on a tear. The last time, she bit me. Then she felt so awful she scratched herself and ran into the street and disappeared. By the time I found the car keys and my shoes and headed in the direction she’d run, panting, my pulse in my ears, sick to my stomach because we live steps from the only major trucking artery that goes north to south in our area, and I am picturing her—

She’s coming over the hill, a smug expression on her face, singing happily. I don’t know what to feel. Relief, of course. Anger, you bet. But mostly, I think, dread.

Someday, she will be a teenager.
Life Raft

3:00 am…frantic knocking, pleading. I remain firm, and I think she’s gone back to bed until I hear a soft whimper and the rustle of covers outside my bedroom door. She’s curled up in her blanket on the floor, intending to sleep there all night.

I can’t.

I’m now eight years old, curled on the floor outside my mother’s bedroom door, pleading to be let in, terrified of the dark, creaking stairwell I must pass to return to my own room. I beg. Plead. Scream like I’m being murdered, and something snaps in my mother. She slams the door open in a rage and grabs a yard stick, chases me back into my twin bed with the pink wicker headboard she painted for me the week before, slaps me across the butt and legs once, twice, before collapsing on top of my body in tears.

She can’t, either.

I open the door, and she comes inside, her eyes wide and grateful, swollen red, puffy, but relieved.

The pacing begins—back and forth, back and forth. The thoughts are back, tormenting her. She won’t say what they are—only that they’re too terrible to talk about and couldn’t someone please just hypnotize her or something to make them go away?

Lately, the thoughts have been so intrusive that I feel like the Katie of Katie is disappearing. I don’t know which thoughts are really mine anymore or who I am. There are too many of them.

What thoughts? Tell me. Please.

Okay—one, she says. Just one. Like the thought that maybe she is responsible for Hitler burning all the Jews.

What?

And sometimes I picture myself murdering everyone in the family. Or killing myself.

I want to write, “My blood runs cold.” But that is cliché, isn’t it? Still, it’s true. I now know what the expression really means. It happens, for real. It happens to me. My blood runs cold. I feel it draining out of my head.

What else, Honey?

NO!
She can’t say…won’t say…It’s too awful. She puts her fingers in her ears and starts singing to block out whatever is in her head.

I’m thinking, what the HELL could be more awful than what she’s already told me. Then I realize. It’s worse.

*Worse* than burning the Jews. *Worse* than murdering her family or killing herself. Whatever is inside her head still, unspoken, unspeakable, it’s much, much worse.

Oh, God.

I walk her back to her room and stay with her until she falls asleep. I go back to my room and latch the door before I get into bed. Locking myself in.

Locking my daughter out.

**Dog Paddling**

I call the doctor the next morning and get an appointment two weeks out—the soonest available to a child who envisions herself committing murder or suicide. There is one child psychiatrist in our area who takes our health insurance. One. And apparently, he’s quite busy.

It isn’t *Seasonal Affective Disorder* this time, I know. It’s summertime.

I backtrack from the edge, placate myself.

Maybe she needs quality time with the family. My husband and I have been so busy with the campers—restoring old campers to sell on Ebay. A scheme I conjured up in the middle of a spring night that was sure to bring in a steady income with minimal investment. My husband has been out of work for over two years now—59 years old, laid off after 30 years working in the print publishing business.

So we don’t have a lot of hope. Only a lot of campers.

**“Unsinkable”**

The camper idea seemed like a good one. I borrowed $2000 from my mother and swore we’d pay her back with lots of interest by the end of the summer.

Here’s the thing about restoring old campers. It’s effing hard. And literally time-consuming.

Our summer was eaten up by the old campers. We sold one, yes. But we barely broke even, and my husband lost part of a finger in the process of ripping out sub-flooring and moldy wallboard.
Okay, truth be told, it was the step-stool that got him, but he wouldn’t have been on it if he hadn’t been shining up the aluminum on the 1972 Coachmen. One clean slice, right in the middle of the bone. Nothing to attach it to, even though we’d carefully collected the fingertip and placed it in a bowl of ice before going to the ER.

Weird to see it floating there, on its own, looking the same as it had when it was part of my husband’s hand, dirty nail and all. Weirder to hand it over to the nurse to dispose of. Goodbye, fingertip. Medical waste now.

**Hole in the Bucket**

She needs more mom and dad time, I tell myself.

I plan a camping trip in the new old RV we bought with the money from our first sale. Family time. We spend the night in a campground then Katie refuses to leave at checkout time the next day.

*I want to stay here forever and ever! I love it here!*

My husband has to catch her, and she tries to jump out of the camper window as I’m settling up the bill inside the office.

She screams, “Help me!”

It sounds like she’s being abducted. It looks like she’s being abducted— by a nine fingered man in a torn shirt, bleeding from a superficial bite wound, his arms wrapped around her at the window of a dilapidated 1982 Winnebago.

I hop back into the camper and floor it as Katie hangs her head out the window and begs for help.

We’re 15 minutes down the road, and Katie is screaming about eating fingers and eating faces, then begging us to help her.

We will, baby, I say. We’re going to take you to the doctor as soon as we get home.

(Cue the RV backfire— BAM!)

The engine sputters then stops.
Back Float

Katie goes quiet and remains eerily calm throughout the next five hours as we sit in the heat by the side of the road, waiting for our tow. She only loses her cool once. She uses the RV toilet then realizes there is no water or soap to wash her hands. This she cannot handle. She may have peed on her hand. She’s contaminated. Help.

I knock on the door of a nearby house and ask them if we might borrow soap for our daughter (who is now screaming like she’s a demon being cast out of a possessed person’s body). They glance nervously at the camper then go inside and return with a bottle of lavender scented hand wash. I thank them profusely.

Katie disappears into the tiny bathroom with the soap, calm again.

Pirates

We forget to return the soap when the tow truck driver comes and hoists our camper onto his trailer. We stole soap from nice strangers. Yep. We’re “that” family.

Drifting

Two weeks in the facility and a laundry list of diagnoses—topped with the one I fear most—bipolar disorder— because I know what it means, and she is only nine years old.

Such a long, long road.

Can’t treat the one she fears most without first stabilizing her on mood meds. So the process begins. An antipsychotic three times a day and two different dosages for the bipolar disorder. One week into her trial, they add something for the OCD—an antidepressant, which may or may not make her manic or suicidal. Perhaps both.

The doctor says her OCD is extremely severe; debilitating, and it cannot be treated effectively right now without a relatively high dosage of the medication. He seems like a kind man—empathetic. He speaks with a thick Indian accent and looks tired, worried, sad. I decide I trust him. I sign the forms, give them permission to drug my daughter. They keep her in the hospital during the initial two week trial period then release her to an outpatient facility for 12 weeks.

Better, I think almost every day. Almost.

She woke up one day from a nightmare about a man peeling the skin on his face off with a vegetable peeler. He turned to her and said, “I bleed for you.”
Then some days she sees herself stabbing someone or pushing a spear through my head. They take her shoes away. She throws a chair or pushes a desk roughly in the direction of a teacher. She sings nonsense songs and giggles uncontrollably on the hour and a half long ride home:

\[
\begin{align*}
Oo-ee-ah- ooh \\
Asparagus baby, I love you \\
Lalalalala-oogie-oogie-um \\
The elephant lady sucks her thumb... \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
Eat your face like a pizza pie \\
Yummy ears and yummy dummy eye \\
My brother’s stupid, fiddle-diddle-die \\
Turtles are expensive, don’t you cry
\end{align*}
\]

**An Island**

She has gained five pounds in two weeks. We caution her against overeating and tell her to eat healthier foods, but she craves carbs and sugar. She steals the sugar packets at restaurants, rips them open and pours the sugar into her mouth. Refuses to brush her teeth or hair, make her bed.

Still…better, I think. No tantrums. No explosions.

But at what cost?

She told me today she still has the creepy, horrible thoughts, but because of the medication, she doesn’t mind them anymore. She isn’t afraid.

I am terrified.
The Band Plays On

*Home life ceases to be free and beautiful as soon as it is founded on borrowing and debt.*

Henrik Ibsen

1. **Play it Again, Sam.**

They say you can never go home, but it isn’t true. We came back.

A year and a half ago we gave notice to our landlady at the Jersey Shore, packed up our belongings (as we had done twice before in the previous 3 years), loaded up two moving vans and a car, and, with the help of my mother’s ex-boyfriend and a couple of guys from Guatemala, moved back into the rotting farmhouse we had abandoned nearly four years before.

Moving is never easy. You spend weeks agonizing over the decision then weeks sifting through the debris of your life trying to decide what is worthy of the mover’s fee and space in the van. You realize after shifting the furniture around and placing all the doodads in boxes that you’ve been living all along in what amounts to a pigsty full of worthless junk. You find holes in the walls you never knew were there, mouse droppings in the empty cabinets, and dust bunnies under the furniture that make you jump because at first look they appear animate, like small, irregularly-shaped animals. Nothing you have is worth the price of the move, but it’s familiar, so you decide to just bring it all along, anyway. You can sort it out on the other end.

Then there’s the guilt over uprooting the kids again.

Throw all of that in with the need to completely rebuild much of the old house’s infrastructure before re-inhabiting it and the fact that it is an hour and a half away, and your husband can’t help because someone has to stay with the kids, so you end up spending late nights
and weekends alone in the spooky old house emptying garbage (four dumpsters full), sweeping broken glass, torn photographs, baby shoes, and plastic toy remnants, removing dead animal carcasses from the fireplace and painted pentagons and curse words from the kitchen floor and basement walls, replacing windows and locks, stripping moldy wallpaper, scraping peeling paint, consulting with plumbers and electricians, and painting, painting, painting… Well, there’s moving, and there’s moving.

To move back into a house you’ve abandoned, you first have to ask the house for forgiveness. This is what I was doing, one room at a time. When the cold rooms felt warm again, I knew we could return, even if all the copper pipes had been stolen.

Half the U.S. population owns barely 2 percent of its wealth, putting the United States near Rwanda and Uganda and below such nations as pre-Arab Spring Tunisia and Egypt when measured by degrees of income inequality.

Eric Alterman

2. I’ve Got Your Number

The top .1 percent (that’s point one, or one tenth of a percent) of Americans (about 160,000 families) have assets in excess of $20 million (How many zeros is that?), with average
incomes of $31 million a year (and no less than $11 million a year), or about 540 times the national average income. (Thompson, 2014)

The typical annual income for those in the top 1 (that’s one) percent is $717,000 per year—175 percent higher than it was in 1980. (McLEAN, 2011)

The median American household income (meaning the combined earnings of everyone over the age of 15 in a household) is about $51,000. That’s the average pre-taxed paycheck for 90 percent of American families as of 2013. (The number is down 6.6 percent from $55,000, the average income in 2000 and about the same as it had been for more than two decades.)

In 2013, there were 46.5 million American families living in poverty. They represent 15.1 percent of the U.S. population and earn less than $23,492 per family of four. The poverty rate remained above 15 percent for three years in 2010, 2011, and 2013—the first time since 1965 that the number had remained so high for three years in a row. (Hargreaves, 2013)

Adjusting for inflation, the income of the top 5 percent of Americans has increased 75 percent since 1979. In that same period of time, the lowest 5 percent has experienced a decrease of 12.1 percent of real income. Contrast that to the years of 1947 to 1979, when earnings increased at almost the same (equal) rate across all groups of American workers. (Abraham, 2012)

Today, CEOs in the U.S. earn approximately 354 times more than the average worker, about $12.3 million each in 2013. (Abraham, 2012)

According to the Family Budget Data from the Economic Policy Institute 2013, the typical American family of 2 parents and 3 kids (Is this really still the definition of “typical” in
our country?) requires a budget of $58,627 per year to live. Assuming that both parents work and earn the “average” American income, the typical American family (those not in the bottom 15 percent or the top 5 or 1 percent, let alone the top .1 percent) pays roughly $7,800 in taxes each year. (Adamovic, 2014) This leaves $47,143 for take-home, or $11,484 less than they need to pay for their basic living expenses (forget about “luxury” items like cell phones, toys, movies, cable, Internet, athletic shoes, jewelry, or trips to the hair stylist—which, by the way, they will have, whether they can afford them or not.)

In 2010, there were over 2.9 million home foreclosures filed in the U.S. and over a million bank repossessions. One in every 69 homes had a foreclosure filed in 2011, and 804,000 homes were repossessed. Between the years of 2007 to 2012, more than 4 million American homes were lost to foreclosure. (Christie, Foreclosures fall to lowest level since 2007, 2012) By 2013, court backlogs and government-sponsored programs like the Home Affordable Refinance Program and the Home Affordable Modification Program had brought the foreclosure number down to 463,000 (Christie, Foreclosures hit six-year low in 2013, 2014), but that number is expected to increase substantially as banks, anticipating a rise in home values, push to clear the judicial log-jam so they can buy back distressed properties at auction and resell them. (What Caused the Mortgage Crisis, 2014)

On average, 90 percent of Americans, or roughly 316 million (here’s what it looks like with zeros: $316,100,000) of us, are living with debt—lots of it. We owe much more than we make.
To whom are we indebted? Most likely someone (remember, corporations are people now) in the top .1 (point 1) percent. In the Land of the Free, the people of 160,000 households (or banks, offices) pull the financial strings of 316,100,000 puppets.

This center cannot hold.

True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made. -Franklin D. Roosevelt

Fascism is capitalism in decay. -Vladimir Lenin

3. Jive Talk and The Ugly American

My relationship with money has historically been an infantile one, at best. (At worst, it could be described as criminal). Ignorant until my early-thirties about things like credit scores, income tax filing (though my dad was an accountant who worked for the I.R.S. for 20 years), checkbook balancing, and bill-paying, my M.O. for years was to throw away the bills I could not pay, unopened, tear up the ticket on my windshield, spend every penny I had at Christmastime, then live on Ramen Noodles until November.

This worked rather well for me through my twenties. A mostly unemployed singer and actress in New York City, I moved often, so even if a bill collector or the I.R.S. had been looking
for me (which they weren’t, according to my father, as it was they who owed me money and not the other way around), until the computer age, I was, for all intents and purposes, able to live on the down-low and not be bothered by trivial matters like taxes, creditors, or jury notices.

In between acting jobs, I temped. I worked as a bathroom attendant, Real Estate agent, Playboy Bunny (the club, not the magazine), disco singer, singing hostess in a Japanese piano bar, singing waitress at a dessert nightclub, and a singing bartender in a theatre district cabaret/piano bar. I was rarely on salary and so came home with my pockets full of cash, which was more often than not spent before my next shift. I lived on hope and air. I never had credit cards or much money, but I had music and a lot of fun in my twenties.

Life was a cabaret. Life was shimmering streets and neon. Life was music.

Gadgets I splurged on in the 80s:

- **An answering machine** that recorded phone messages when I was away from home. (Until the invention of answering machines for home use, performers in New York paid a monthly fee for an “answering service” so as not to miss important calls from producers and casting directors. This was a must-have in the industry where missed phone calls meant missed work. Also, it was tax-deductible, which might have meant something, had I been filing taxes at the time. Honestly, I didn’t even know what “tax deductible” meant.)

- **A black cassette tape recorder** that was approximately 8 inches wide and 5 inches long and weighed about 4 pounds, later replaced by a more-portable Sony
Walkman with bright orange headphones and a plastic strap that allowed me to walk the streets of the city marching to my own drum.

• A digital alarm clock with a built-in radio.

• A “boom box” portable stereo that weighed about 15 pounds and could be run on electricity or four “D” batteries. It also had a cassette tape deck, so I could tape my voice lessons.

I spent many evenings at the record store. I’d thumb my way through stacks of shiny cardboard jackets until I recognized a face I hadn’t heard from in a while, and I would pay the cashier in crumpled loose bills and change. At home, I’d read through the jacket or sleeve then listen to the album over and over again until I was able to sing along.

I was an avid reader, and any time I had a little cash or when I was on the outs yet again with my boyfriend (which was often), I’d make my way down to Shakespeare & Co. or the St. Mark’s Book Shop where I would spend hours sifting through the shelves and sitting on the floor, reading (no cushy sofas or expresso bars in bookstores back then). I’d purchase a stack of hardbacks and magazines I couldn’t afford and lug them back to my walk-up then hole up in bed for a day or two with my purchases, a bottle of Diet Coke, and several packs of M&Ms, lost and found. A high school dropout, I absorbed the language until I felt like a bloated, soggy sponge in need of squeezing.

These were my guilty indulgences in the 80s. My needs were pretty simple, which is good because, like I said, I had next to nothing.
The Beat Goes On…

In 1991, I spent six months touring in Europe as part of the HAIR cast. We were paid in marks, and the savvy-minded cast members monitored the foreign exchange and cashed their marks in for other currencies at the opportune moment to maximize their earnings while on tour.

Not me. The whole thing was too befuddling and gave me a headache. I used my marks to buy stuff (a piece of the Berlin wall on a keychain, lapel pins of every country I visited, a teddy bear, cigarettes, postcards, etc.) or go places. I returned to New York with a new portable CD player (cutting edge technology at the time), a CD “wallet” filled with shiny new CDs, my new German boyfriend (a pianist, who looked and acted a lot like my American pianist ex-boyfriend, but with an irritating accent), and a purse full of German money. I had no idea how much I’d managed to save until I deposited it into my bank account.

After six months on a bus and truck through Europe, traveling 7 to 10 hours a day and performing barefoot (and, for a few seconds, at least, bare-assed) in drafty stadiums and ancient theatres with little or no heat, having contracted double pneumonia and been left for 10 days to get well or die in Wells, Austria (where I managed to survive by whispering the only phrase I knew at the time in German, “Friddaten suppe, bitte,” to the room service operator three times a day), I had a grand total of $1200 in the bank.

Was I dispirited? Nope. I felt rich.
It was the largest amount of money I had ever been able to save at once. I was thrilled. Not only did I have $1200, I was eligible for unemployment because I’d worked the required number of weeks “on the books” performing in a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Philadelphia prior to leaving for the European tour. I went downtown to collect my unemployment paycheck every two weeks, and I went back to auditioning.

My German replacement boyfriend, Andy, quickly became disillusioned with New York City and the American obsession with “bucks,” a word he would spit gutturally and repeatedly whenever he returned to the apartment from a walk on St. Mark’s Place. The only thing that bothered him more than our rabidly irresponsible capitalism and material excess was our television commercials, which, of course, we are all used to but which made him positively insane, particularly when *The Tonight Show* band would begin to play, only to be preempted by a series of ads. He didn’t understand why I was not indignant at the interruption and at not being allowed to listen to the music.

The truth is it had never occurred to me that I was missing the music. The band played, and the commercials came on. When the commercials were over, the band finished up the tune with a flourish, the audience clapped, and Johnny Carson turned his back to the band and talked to Ed. The music was incidental. The band was there to play the commercials on and off, to my mind. It was the way it had always been, and I’d never questioned it, never thought about missing the great music of Doc Severinson and the Tonight Show Orchestra or how often the programming was interrupted by ads for deodorant, cough syrup, antacids, shampoo, double-edged razors, and a million other things we Americans apparently need to survive.
Andy became morose. He holed up in my bedroom, watching *Cops*—the only show he liked on American T.V. and a constant source of incredulity for him. He sang along with the jingle, *Bad boys bad boys, wha’cha gonna do?* and snorted at the stupidity of people on this side of the earth. Most of all, he was appalled by and contemptuous of the American infatuation with money—getting it, spending it, hoarding it, lording it, stealing it, pining for it. Even our music and art was contaminated to his mind—slickly packaged and hawked like merchandise.

Ten *bucks* for the album. Twenty *bucks* for the book. Forty *bucks* for the framed print. One hundred *bucks* for the tickets to the show. *Bucks, bucks, bucks.*

*What?* I would say, wishing him away.

Culture Quiz:

1) How many advertising jingles can you sing off the top of your head?

2) What product are they for, and what are the qualities of that product?

3) How many local politicians can you name off the top of your head?

4) What are their policies, and how will they make life better in your community?
L’Oreal’s slogan ‘because you’re worth it’ has come to epitomize banal narcissism of early 21st century capitalism; easy indulgence and effortless self-love all available at a flick of the credit card.

Geoff Mulgan

4. Flying High Now

Between 1983 and 1987, the annual inflation rate in the U.S. remained just under 5 percent, and our country experienced unprecedented economic growth. Reagan-era corporate tax cuts and the deregulation of industries spurred business profits and investments. At the same time, the administration slashed funding to social services, leaving schools, the poor, mentally ill, homeless, and farmers, for instance, in a pickle, financially-speaking. Sluggish exports and a drought in 1986 and 1988 added to the bread belt’s woe, and with little help from the government coming their way, family farms were fast disappearing or being swallowed whole by large-scale corporate farming operations. Musicians Willie Nelson, John Melloncamp, and Neil Young responded to the agricultural calamity by launching Farm Aid in 1985—a tradition that has continued to raise millions of dollars for family farmers in danger of losing their farms. This hasn’t, however, contained the crisis.

Between 1980 and 1986, the U.S. federal deficit rose from $74 thousand-million (I have no idea how many zeros that is), to $221 thousand-million (a lot). It fell back to $150 thousand-million (still a lot) in 1987, just in time for an autumn stock market crash. (Welling, 2012) The economy was slowing, banks and their insurance companies were toppling, but we the people were just starting to spend and having a swell time doing it.
On a news report one night in New York, Sue Simmons talked about a tiny quartz chip the Japanese were developing that would revolutionize the way information was processed. At the time, I could not imagine how the average consumer stood to benefit from such a thing or why it was an important story.

Men and women whose early youth was shaped in the ordeal of the Great Depression showed the values formed in that crucible when tyranny threatened a world.

Steve Buyer

5. Bluegrass & Blue Collar

My maternal grandfather was born in Kentucky in 1906. One of six children, his father died before he finished high school, and the family had to move to Ohio, where his mother took in laundry and borders to help make ends meet. My great-uncle, the oldest boy in the family, dropped out of school to go to work at the steel mill. My grandfather followed suit shortly after graduating high school. The second-oldest boy, my Great Uncle Stanley, worked in a shooting gallery in the traveling carnival. When the steel mill workers went on strike, my grandfather joined his big brother working as a carnie. They sent home what they earned, which could not have been very much, and the family did not starve.
While working in the shooting gallery, my grandfather met my grandmother, a lanky Tennessee Baptist secretary at the county courthouse. She was engaged (and had been for five years) to be married to someone else—someone financially stable, known and loved by her family, someone invited to the dinner table every Sunday evening. My grandfather fell in love at first site and pursued my grandmother relentlessly until she finally broke off her engagement, quit her job, and agreed to marry him. He returned to his job at ARMCO steel after the strike was over and eventually became a union organizer. My mother and her two sisters were born within the first five years of my grandparent’s marriage, and ARMCO transferred my grandfather and his family from Middletown to a steel plant outside of Houston, Texas. My mother remembers the two-bedroom, one bathroom house she shared with her two older sisters and her parents as “…tiny, cookie-cutter, but no more so than anyone else’s house in the neighborhood.” There was a small yard, and her father turned part of the kitchen into an extra bedroom when the girls were teenagers. Until that time, she and her sisters had shared a room.

They didn’t have a lot, but neither did everybody else, so nobody really noticed. They ate home-cooked meals at their Formica kitchen table. My grandmother sewed their clothes. They had one car (paid for in cash because my grandfather did not believe in borrowing money), which my grandfather took to work every day. My mother and her sisters walked anywhere they wanted or needed to go—to school, church (three times a week), the community pool, or store—in the Texas heat. Nobody had an air conditioner. Antiperspirants weren’t a thing yet. Everyone was sweaty all the time. Feet got blistered. Summers were hot and boring, but it was the only life they knew.

My mother practiced twirling in the backyard, was a mascot for the junior high band when she was in fourth grade and dreamed of someday being a majorette. (She achieved this
dream in seventh grade and then was a featured twirler in high school and was in her glory for three years before graduating and realizing that twirlers and drill team majors weren’t a thing in real life. This left her feeling bewildered and purposeless, as though the best of her life was behind her, at the ripe age of 18.)

In mid-July every year, the whole family would pile into the car, roll the windows down, and head to Alabama to visit relatives. With no air conditioner, toys, gadgets, headphones, etc. From Texas, to Alabama—three girls crammed into the backseat, their parents sitting side-by-side like lovebirds in front, for the 14 hour trip. For entertainment, my mother and her sisters looked for Burma Shave signs along the way. They would also sing and harmonize with their parents. They were the music.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty, and all forms of human life.

John F. Kennedy

6. Texas Two-Step

My father’s family has lived in Freestone County for several generations, having come to Texas from England on a Spanish land grant in the early 18th Century. By the time my dad and his identical twin brother were born, most of the family’s land had been lost to the war, gambling debts, and other natural and man-made misfortunes. My grandparents lived on a farm next to my
great grandparents until my aunt was 3 and my dad and his brother were 9 years old. When the farm house and barn burned to the ground, my grandfather went to work at the cotton mill and shortly after lost his right arm when it got caught in the gin.

Destitute, the family was reduced to accepting charity from the church until they could get back on their feet. They rented and later bought a tar-paper shack that had been built by the previous gin-keeper. They insulated the walls with newspaper and let the fields to local farmers for pasture grazing. My dad and uncle worked in the school cafeteria to pay for their lunches and in the cotton fields after school and on the weekends to help pay for food and household expenses. My grandmother, used to hard work, having picked cotton on her father’s farm from the time she was old enough to walk, learned to type and got a secretarial job in town at the gas company. She worked there for the next 40 years.

My grandfather never recovered from the traumatic setbacks and turned to the bottle and other forms of debauchery for comfort. He built a henhouse, raised chickens for the corporate poultry industry, wore a hook on one arm, and spent most of his time in his recliner in front of the console television set in the living room, yelling at the screen. He had an explosive, violent temper, and whenever possible, his family steered clear of him when he was drinking, which was most of the time.

After graduating from high school, my dad and uncle joined the Navy. I have a black and white photo of them standing side by side in their Navy whites, my dad’s cap playfully cocked to one side—a relatively slight breach of military convention, but a breach, nonetheless. Treated as two halves of a whole (they are dressed identically in every photo I have of them until they were married), the brothers attended basic training together in San Diego and then went to Guam to
work in cryptology for the duration of their service. They sent most of their paychecks home to my grandmother, along with occasional trinkets they’d picked up on the island, including a music box with a wishing well that plays, “Home on the Range.” (After my grandmother died, I inherited this cherished item. I imagine the two homesick boys coming across it in some island gift shop so far from home and remembering their childhood ponies, herding cattle, and the smell of the cotton fields on a summer day).

When they returned stateside, they attended Sam Houston State College on the GI bill, where they met and married my aunt and my mom, both of whom promptly quit school and got jobs to support their husbands while they finished up their education. (Having been deprived, due to financial necessity, of his own formal education, my maternal grandfather—a self-taught intellectual who wrote poetry and frequently quoted Shakespeare and Chaucer—insisted that each of his three girls spend at least one year in college. Graduation was never the aim—experience and learning were. According to my mother, though, finding a husband was one legitimate goal of first generation college females in the late 50s. So nobody was disappointed or shocked when she left school. Her mission was accomplished.)

My mother says when they were newlyweds she and my father ate nothing but peanut butter, crackers, and tomato soup until my dad graduated with a degree in accounting and went to work for the I.R.S. She was four months pregnant and working as a secretary for an accounting firm in Denton when her father died after arterial surgery, and she miscarried. When my mother asked her boss for time off after her miscarriage, he told her no. She had already taken time off when her father was dying and what was it going to be next, her mother? She cried that he was being unfair, and he fired her. This was the state of the workplace for moderately-educated Texas women in 1961.
In a photograph taken shortly before my grandfather’s death, my parents look to me like Tab Hunter and Natalie Wood or perhaps Jack and Jackie Kennedy as they stand beside their tiny Austin Healy Sprint, smiling and waving at the camera.

It is the last happy photo of the two of them together.

I was born the following year, and the rest of the photos are of me and my mom or me and my dad, but never the two of them together. A few days before my first birthday, Kennedy was shot as his motorcade moved through the sunny streets of downtown Dallas. Two years later, in 1965, my father left us in the new three-bedroom house he had bought for $17,650 with his VA loan and went to work at his office in the Federal Building in downtown Houston. When he came home, my mother and I were gone.
Sixties Fun Facts

- In 1960, the average price for a home in the U.S. was $11,900 ($56,000 in today’s money)—a little more than two years’ salary. The average annual income was $5,115.
- $100 in 1960 is about $679 in today’s currency.
- The average price for a new car was $2,600. Tiny cars like VW Beetles or Austin Healys were less—about $1800. A gallon of gas was about a quarter. (Fun Facts from the 60s, 2010)
- After taking office in 1961, JFK promised the world that within the decade our country would put a man on the moon. He created the Peace Corp to provide assistance with education, farming, construction, and health care to underdeveloped countries.
- Martin Luther King advocated for civil rights through non-violent protests. He was assassinated in 1968.
- The “Cold War” was essentially a stare-down between the U.S. and Russia, both of whom had weapons capable of destroying the other. Tensions escalated during the Cuban Missile Crisis and, for a few days most Americans thought there was a good likelihood we would all die.
- In 1969, Americans watched as Apollo 11 landed on the moon. Neil Armstrong took “… one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” The mission cost approximately $20 billion.
- Capitalizing on the teen marketing success of performers like Elvis Presley and Bill Hayley and the Comets, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones traveled to the U.S. and became recording sensations.
- There were only 3 channels and 30 weekly television series produced in the 60s. Westerns, detective shows, science fiction, and shows about talking animals and magic people were very popular.
- New must-have “gadgets” included cassette tape recorders, disposable razors, and portable calculators. (1960s News, Events, Popular Culture and Prices, 2014)
The sixties were characterized by a heady belief in instantaneous solutions.

Audre Lorde

7. Hell in a hand basket

Between 1960 and 1979, the divorce rate in the United States doubled (and then some) after the then Governor of California and future President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, enacted the first “no-fault” divorce law, and practically every state in the union followed suit. Spouses were no longer required to present a reason when they wanted to get a divorce. They were no longer legally held to the marriage contract and could end a marriage whenever they felt like it, for no reason at all. (Wilcox, 2009)

Statistically, it is demonstrated that poor people are more likely to divorce than people who have money. Children of broken homes are likely to achieve less education and have lower earning potential than kids from intact households. Divorce also reduces the income-earning potential of the average family by roughly 42 percent and contributes to a cycle of poverty and social dysfunction. (Patrick F. Fagan, 1999)

Statistically, by all accounts, I was headed for nothing good, and I had plenty of company
I once tried standing up on my toes to see far out in the distance, but I found that I could see much farther by climbing to a high place.

Xun Zi

8. You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby

A moderately-educated, beautiful divorcee in 1971 has options. She can marry her wealthy boss, travel the world; buy antiques, a Mercedes, artwork, and expensive jewelry. If her new marriage is, in spite of its abundant trappings, an unhappy one, she can divorce the new husband and find another one. If that doesn’t work out, she can divorce him, too, etc.

9. I Think I Can

The lonely accountant whose wife has divorced him and taken the child because he isn’t a good communicator has options. In this land of opportunities and second chances, he can: meet and marry a pretty girl 16 years his junior; buy a moderately-priced home with a small backyard in a manicured development half an hour outside of town; have two new kids; move to a larger, more expensive house; quit his job and move his new family back to his rural hometown when
the mortgage on the bigger house becomes unaffordable; set up a new accounting business in a
town with less than 3000 people; take out loans to build another home, buy his new family a new
car, trampoline, horse, and Bass boat; make minimum payments on every credit card until
drowning in debt, he dies of depression and anxiety, leaving the whole mess to his second wife
to figure out.

Bankruptcy laws allow companies to smoothly reorganize, but not college graduates burdened
by student loans. -Robert Reich

10. Would You Like to Swing on a Star?

How to Be Smart and Stupid at the Same Time: a Tutorial

- Get a student loan in your mid-30s, and return to school.
- Do really well, and transfer to an Ivy League university to impress your mother.
- Borrow the maximum amount allowed every semester.
- Graduate with honors, but deeply in debt, with a BA in Literature and Writing.
  
  (Seriously?—Okay, you apparently didn’t think that one through.)
- Get hired as an editor at a small press then get married to your new, nice (but poor)
  boyfriend.
Defer your student loan repayment when, 8 months pregnant, you get laid off from your job. Keep deferring your loans because you don’t want to go back to work yet and miss all your son’s “firsts.” Defer again when you have your second child and move to your “dream” house. Defer again when your husband loses his job.

Go to grad school when you run out of deferments. You now owe over $100K because the interest is capitalized. What now?

Take out more student loans (I mean, what’s the difference at this point?), and take only 2 or 3 classes per semester to delay your graduation (and loan repayment) as long as possible.

Take anti-anxiety medication to stay alive for the kids, and pray that someone will hire you when you finally get your MFA, at 53.

11. The Long and Winding Road

I met my husband in an East Village bar in 1996. Aside from singing in them, I’d never been one to hang out in bars, but the Grassroots Tavern swallowed me alive one night when my mostly sheepdog, Hugo, splayed his legs on the sidewalk and refused to budge until I’d walked down the three ancient, foot-grooved marble steps and into the dark, subterranean world I would inhabit for the next three years. I blame Hugo for everything that has happened since.

The night before my recently adopted mutt pulled his “Lady and the Tramp” bit, I had made it my mission to ease his separation anxiety by leaving him alone in the apartment for short, increasing intervals of time. That way, I figured, he would gradually realize that when I left, I always came back, so there was nothing to worry about. He’d been my dog for less than a
week, adopted from a shelter in Long Island, and he followed me from room-to-room with a troubled expression. I had been assigned a secretarial temp job for the next morning, and I was nervous about leaving him alone for several hours in one shot. I didn’t want him to think I’d abandoned him like his previous fool owner had apparently done.

He seemed smart enough to catch onto the concept quickly, so I gave him a kiss on the head, told him I’d be back soon, and went downstairs to stand in the vestibule for 15 minutes. But as I leaned against the wall with a paperback in my hand, I could hear him snuffling the doorjamb and whimpering one flight up. I realized he could smell me and knew I was still in the building. He was never going to settle down and relax as long as I was within nose-shot, so I went back upstairs, grabbed my purse, kissed my jubilant puppy once again, then left my apartment and the building to walk around the block a few times.

*Cue the thunderclap and monsoon.*

Ducking underneath an old brownstone’s overhang, I realized, for the first time since I’d moved to the block seven years before, that there was a small, dimly lit bar underneath the record shop steps. I leaned against the brick wall and peeked inside a pair of filthy windows on double wooden doors, curious to see what type of people might inhabit this mysterious space that had seemingly manifested itself out of thin air on this rainy night.

It didn’t look like much—a long rectangle with a Wurlitzer juke box and tables with chairs on one side, dart boards in the back, and a lengthy L-shaped wooden bar with tall barstools wrapping its circumference. A cloudy, peeling, gilt-framed mirror hung above an antique cash register, and there were strings of colorful Christmas lights draped over glass cabinets lined with shelf liqueurs and top rack bottles. At one end of the bar, a ponytailed man in
a rumpled jean jacket leaned over a paperback, squinting at the page in the dark through thick glasses. He fingered an empty shot glass as the bartender—a young brunette in an oversized Giants t-shirt and blue jeans—refilled his pint glass with draft beer. A stocky, gray-haired Italian man sat on a barstool behind the bar, eating fistfuls of popcorn from a wicker basket, sipping at a snifter of bourbon and watching the game on an old color television propped on top of three phone books behind the server’s station. Two large dogs—an Irish setter and a shepherd mix—chased each other back and forth across the scuffed hardwood floors. Otherwise, the bar was empty.

I decided what the hell and slipped inside, took a place in the center of the bar and ordered a glass of red wine. The bartender, Maria, introduced herself and placed a basket of popcorn in front of me along with the wine glass. The reading man with the ponytail never looked up from his book, which was a relief, as I was afraid that being a woman alone in a bar might invite unwanted attention, and I was awkward and inept at handling flirtation.

Maria introduced me to Bob, the other bartender. Bob nodded politely and went back to watching the game, tossing pieces of popcorn to the dogs. After 15 minutes, I had not finished the wine, but I paid my bill, scattered the last of my popcorn crumbs for the dogs, and got up to leave. I explained to Maria about my new rescue and how I was trying to wean him from my presence a little at a time. Bob’s face lit up at the mention of my adopted sheep-mutt, and he suggested I bring him in to play with Zak and Ringo, his and Maria’s dogs.

If I had stuck to my original plan, or if I had just said, “No, thank you. It’s late, and I have to work tomorrow morning,” my life might have turned out differently. I wonder. Instead, I retrieved my very relieved Hugo and returned to The Grassroots Tavern, where I was, that night,
and for at least a year after, happily greeted as, “Mrs. Hugo” by Bob, Maria, the ponytailed
reader (my future husband), and whomever else happened to be drinking themselves into a
stupor at this crazy bar where the drinks were apparently free if you had a cute dog.

Two and a half years, and many, many Bass Ales and vodka shots later, Maria
ceremoniously snipped the long, blonde ponytail from my fiancé’s head to celebrate (and
facilitate—I hated the ponytail) our engagement. Bob hung the trophy above the mirror behind
the bar, and, though we moved to the suburbs a year later when I was pregnant with my son, and
The Grassroots Tavern lost Bob to liver cirrhosis 12 years later, Maria and my husband’s
ponytail remain there still, underneath the perpetual Christmas lights.

My husband was in his late 30s and had been using The Grassroots Tavern as a living
room for 10 years by the time I showed up. He could not tolerate his roommate and so came
home every day from the office, grabbed a book, and headed for his spot at the bar. Because he
did not have a cute dog, only every third drink or so was free for him. Though he had been
steadily employed for 20 years, he had very little, other than his retirement fund, in the way of
savings. I, of course, had nothing. Except a very cute dog.
But if each man could have his own house, a large garden to cultivate and healthy surroundings - then, I thought, there will be for them a better opportunity of a happy family life.

George Cadbury

12. A Wing and a Prayer

(A) Facts:

- Weddings, even small ones held at your future sister-in-law’s house in Chestnut Hill, are expensive.
- Nobody wants to raise a baby in a miniscule cold-water flat over a bar on St. Mark’s Place, especially sharing the space with a sort-of-sheepdog and a cat named Pinhead.
- Cashing in a retirement fund in order to pay the deposit for a tiny cape cod on the Jersey Shore is frowned upon, but if you’re expectant, middle-aged newlyweds who have had a lot of fun but never saved a penny, it’s the only entry into the suburban illusion of middle class America.
- If you own a small house by the water an hour outside of New York City and a couple of mad terrorists hijack planes and take down the World Trade Center towers, your little house will double in value within two years. This is what they call a “silver lining” and is good because what looked like a mansion compared to your St. Mark’s Place walkup is
actually, you now realize, a very small house for a growing boy, his parents, and a large shaggy dog.

*I’ve never been certain whether the moral of the Icarus story should only be, as is generally accepted, ‘don’t try to fly too high,’ or whether it might also be thought of as ‘forget the wax and feathers, and do a better job on the wings.*

— Stanley Kubrick

(B) How to Fly *(Like Icarus)*

- Use the money from the sale of the tiny house to purchase a bigger one with a closed in porch, third bedroom, and a large open space on the second floor that you paint blue and yellow and dub, “the playroom.”

- In spite of having started late, with literally nothing, skip over the hard part and achieve the *American Dream*— an adorable three year-old, a nice old house, friendly neighbors, and a little extra money to spend on things. Ta-da!

- Build a fort and swing set in the back yard beside the above-ground pool with the giant rubber whale floating in it, host play dates, shower your son with expensive wooden trains and electronic gadgets (the gadgetry industry has grown so since the 80s) on Christmas and
his birthday. Enroll in *Mommy and Me*, swimming classes, Mom clubs, and sing-along groups. Take family vacations. Know that life is good. (*Feel the sunshine on your back?*)

- Wake up in a panic one night because your son is an only child. Fret about it, wonder if he’ll be lonely and who will be there to share his memories after you and your husband are gone. (Because face it—you’re both old.)

- Convince your husband that an emergency back-up child is necessary. There’s no time to lose. Agreeable, as always (you unreasonably hate this about him), he will say, “Why the hell not?”

- Miscarry EBC #1 at four months, on a Friday. You will have to wait until Monday morning to have the DNC and remove the dead baby. This may mess up your mind for a while.

- Miscarry EBC #2 early in the pregnancy and decide you’re just too old for another.

- Stop trying and adopt a new dog because Hugo is now buried underneath the single tree in the backyard, and you feel lost and empty.

- Put your son in daycare so he’ll have little friends, and get a job working as a newspaper reporter. (Cue the drumroll and applause sign.)

You’re 42 and pregnant again.
• Take out a home equity loan to turn the basement into a playroom and add a second bathroom. Turn the upstairs into a nursery and buy beautiful white matching furniture, framed *Noah’s Ark* prints, and pastel bedding for the little girl on the way. (Your son will take his finger paints upstairs when you aren’t looking and paint the white furniture purple, which he thinks is much prettier.)

• Gain 75 pounds, have another second C-section, bring your daughter home from the hospital and install a co-sleeper beside you in bed so you won’t drop *this* baby on its head by accident while sleeping like you did with the first one.

• Move your husband to the sofa. For the next 15 years.

• When your new baby is old enough, place her in the pretty purple/white crib then realize how far the nursery is from your bedroom downstairs.

• Move into the nursery. Now your four year-old son will be downstairs with your husband. Your family will be living on two separate floors of the house. This will not do. You must have a bigger house—one with all the bedrooms on the same floor.
• List your home, fall in love with a bigger, older, much more expensive one with two acres in
a rural community near the Pennsylvania border and convince yourself you’ll be able to
afford it if all goes well and you live frugally. *All will not go well.*

• Sell your house for twice what you had paid for it two years before, pay off the home equity
loan, and make an offer on the old farmhouse, which will promptly fail inspection. *(Can you
feel something dripping?)*

• Agree to assume the cost of a new septic system, and roll the extra $50,000 into the home
loan. Your broker says you can refinance in 6 months, so stop worrying about
the scary numbers. Snafus in the timing between the sale of the old house and
purchase of the new house mean you will have to move your belongings
twice—once into storage, then again in 30 days, to the house. The cost of the
move will be $7000.00.

• With nowhere to go for the month between closings, sell your
nice car with low mileage and buy a 28-foot camper and a used truck
with high mileage, which will increase your payments (and gas bill) a lot.
Live in a campground with the kids and pets for 30 days. *(Are you
falling, or flying?)* Your husband will come home from work much later
now, well after dark. The first week you’re in your new home, he will
walk through the door ashen and tell you his company laid off 300 employees in one day. He
has survived the cut, so don’t worry. *(Such a long way to fall...)* The neighbors will tell you
your 176 year-old house is haunted, which you’ll think is cool...
Within three months of moving into the old house, your son will fall in the driveway and need stitches in his head; your husband will wake up in the middle of the night unable to breathe and need an ambulance for what turns out to be an esophageal spasm; your daughter will fall off a neighbor’s bunk-bed and get a concussion; you will have an allergic reaction to the black walnuts you are trying to de-husk (Martha Stewart said nothing about how thick the gloves should be). You will end up in intensive care with cardiac vasospasms that will damage your heart. (Splash.)

You will get out of the hospital, spend two weeks in bed recovering then trip on the front steps your first day up and break your ankle. A few months later, you will have an emergency appendectomy. The ambulance will begin to circle your block like a hawk.

- Refinance your loan to pay some hospital bills and get a little cash back before Christmas. The kids, having had a rough year, will need lots of stuff.

- See a news report that says the economy is about to tank because of something called a “bubble” and that things will get much worse over the next few years. Know in your gut this is going to sink your family, but go on living as before. (The heavy, hot, melted wax pulls you under.)

- When the bills keep coming, throw them away unopened because your husband hasn’t had a raise in two years and you can’t pay. Try not to panic when his company lays off another round of workers, then another, or when he stays late at the office late every night because
he’s expected to cover the workload of the people who are no longer there. He will lose
weight. Think of it as a good thing. (*Gasp*...)

- Refinance again, then again. When the bank pulls out of the third re-fi deal at the last minute,
two weeks before Christmas and won’t say why, call your mom for money to buy presents
for the kids.

- Find out why—the house is worth $100,000 less that what you owe on it, and the banks have
been caught lending money to people who they know cannot hope to pay, like you. They
aren’t allowed to do that anymore. (*The sea is rising.*)

- Call the mortgage company (which has changed four times in two years as the banks
devoured each other in an apparently endless financial food chain), and ask for a loan
modification. Explain about the health and financial issues. A very polite lady will put you
on hold and re-route your call. Remain on hold, pushing buttons and looping your way
through endless message banks until you finally arrive at the “I’m not yet late with my
payment but would like information on a loan modification so I don’t get behind”
department, which will thank you for holding and then hang up on you.

- Call back. A very pleasant-sounding woman will tell you to hold on and reroute your call,
day after day, week after week.
• One day, when you miraculously reach a supervisor, do as she suggests and speak to a consumer advocate. Arrange for a three-way call appointment with the bank. Fill out mounds of paperwork, fax it to the bank then spend an hour on the phone trying to negotiate a deal. The bank will say they’re sorry, but you don’t make enough money to qualify for the modification. Perhaps, they will suggest, if you could just get three months behind in your payment, you would then be eligible for a new type of modification, specifically for people in danger of losing their homes. Unfortunately, they will say, they are not allowed to speak with you about this modification until you are at least three months behind in the payment.

• On the suggestion of the bank, stop paying your mortgage for three months, at which point, they will stick a *Notice of Intent to Foreclose* on your front door and mail you certified copies.

• Go ahead—be embarrassed, ashamed, mortified, and afraid. Just don’t let the kids see. It’s Christmas, after all.

• File for Chapter 7, then wait until the Christmas break to pack up your belongings and move the family into a 4 bedroom apartment in Washington Heights (where there’s free heat and hot water and there won’t be a $400 a month commute). Now the kids will get to see their father before bedtime.
• Decide it’s a good thing—an adventure. (*Swimming instead of flying or sinking...Swimming as a sort of flying.*)

• Leave the fake Christmas tree standing in the living room, still decorated. This will give the nosy neighbors something to talk about.

• After a year and a half in the city, start longing for a little outdoor space. Tell your husband you’re tired of being greeted by the kids every morning with, “Yo! Sup?”

• Find an inexpensive cottage by the shore and do the whole nightmare, expensive moving thing again.

• Two years later, realize the bank has not touched the house you left behind and that it’s rotting. Drive there to rummage through boxes of things you didn’t have room for in New York City. Discover that vandals have stolen the plumbing, and teenagers have trashed the inside—that it is now the neighborhood haunted house, for real.

• Feel strangely relieved on the day your husband, who is now almost 60, finally doesn’t make the cut. After he spends over a year looking for a new job in print publishing, when his unemployment is about to run out, make a decision that seems crazy. (*You have fallen. Will you swim, or drown?*)
• Take what’s left of his severance pay and put every penny of it into the haunted house to make it livable again. Put your kids back in their old school. Apologize to the neighbors. Apologize to the house. Take the damn Christmas tree down to the basement. Call a lawyer. Buy a couple of chickens. Plant the garden. Adopt a new puppy. Write. Play the old upright. Listen to the music. Be the music. Sing. Throw the dice. Tread water, hold your breath, and wait for whatever comes next. This is America, after all. Anything can happen.
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Curriculum Vita

Tammy McKillip was born in Houston, Texas. The child of John Douglas Nettle and Linda Davis Nettle (Scharck), Tammy has a BA in Literature and Writing from Columbia University’s School of General Studies. She moved from Texas to New York City in 1981 to pursue a career in the musical theatre. Tammy was the Executive Editor of *Quarto—the Literary Journal for Columbia University’s School of General Studies* for two years. She married her husband, Bruce McKillip, in 1999 and has two children. She works as a freelance newspaper reporter and content writer and editor for various print and online publications. Her fiction and poetry have been published in *The Columbia Review*, *Promethean*, and *The Belmont Literary Journal*. She was awarded second prize in a *Literal Latte* contest for her essay, “Truth Be Told” which will appear in the Spring, 2016 edition of the journal. Tammy is a member of Alpha Kappa Rho, The Golden Key International Honor Society and received an invitation to join Phi Kappa Phi.

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