

2018-01-01

Deep Down

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DEEP DOWN

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Dean of the Graduate School

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Dedication

Deep Down is dedicated to my mother, who is overshadowed in many of these essays by my father, but without whom, this body would never exist.

DEEP DOWN

by

JESSICA MARIE GRANGER, B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2018

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the professors in the Creative Writing Department at The University of Texas El Paso. I would first like to thank Professor Sasha Pimentel for her unending support and positivity throughout the thesis process. I would also like to thank Professor Liz Scheid, who introduced me to the lyric essay, and Professor Tim Hernandez, who pulled me into his social action writing course and never let me go. I wish to express my sincerest thanks to Professor and Department Chair, Daniel Chacón, for his guidance throughout my years at The University of Texas El Paso, and especially for his faith in my ability to write and teach during a study abroad program in London, England. Further, a moment of praise should be granted to my family for allowing me the time to write this manuscript without complaint, and finally, to my husband Sherwin Granger, who experiences the pain and reality of my writing in real-time.

Thank you to the editors of the following journals, who published the following pieces from this manuscript:

Granger, Jessica. "The Life of a Lung Nodule". *Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review*, Spring/Summer 2018.

Granger, Jessica. "10 Things My Father Taught Me for My 10th Birthday." *As You Were: The Military Review*, Vol. 8, Spring 2018.

Granger, Jessica. "One Breath". *Awakened Voices Magazine*, Fall 2018.

Granger, Jessica. "The Science of a Cell". *SHANTI*H Journal, Issue 3.1, Spring 2018.

Creating the Unspeakable

The critical process I have earned in my years with the MFA in Creative Writing program at the University of Texas El Paso has developed in stages from aesthetics and narrative techniques, to embodying the consciousness of a writer. I have focused on taking courses that specialize in creative nonfiction and poetry. These courses have helped me achieve the full-length manuscript, and my final thesis, *Deep Down*. The influence for this thesis comes from many authors and writers such as Roland Barthes, Dinty W. Moore, Mario Vargas Llosa, T Clutch Fleischmann, among others, and through my lived experiences on the margins of society.

I was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, to a Cuban father and Portuguese mother. My parents both immigrated to the United States when they were young, but because of the newness of American culture, I was raised primarily within their unique cultures. English was secondary for my family, and I spent most of my toddler years speaking in Spanish and Portuguese, respectively. I began to learn English in kindergarten and while the language fascinated me, it worked as a barrier between me and the world around me. I could not express myself verbally and so I became frustrated, but I also found new ways of looking at the world I couldn't reach in words. I also began to learn how to adapt culturally and verbally to what was expected of me as a native born American.

The juxtaposition of these two vastly different cultures, that of my mother and father, further alienated me from the populace I was born into. I became this enigma, this border between two unlike things, that of the communist island of Cuba and the colonizing power of the Portuguese. I faced persecution equally, from family members who didn't appreciate my blended identity to those who judged me for not being an English-speaking child in the United States.

I am what Gloria Anzaldúa calls a “border resident” or a person that grows up on the border of two contradicting cultures. She writes before the first edition of her book *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), “I have a sense that certain ‘faculties’— not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored— and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened” (Preface to the First Edition). My awakening as a border resident began in the beginning of my MFA program when I would attempt to write fiction over and over again and only come up with stories that are closely linked to my attempts at achieving a mind-body union within myself. It arrived fully when I sat down for the first time and read my own published work about my sexual assault. I stared at the pages until tears began to form in my eyes. I knew then that I have made the right choice to pursue creative nonfiction, to pursue telling my stories in ways that can reach others like me, other suffering on the borders.

I grew up in poverty after my parents’ divorce when I was just four-years-old. This lack of resources further complicated my perception and identity. My life chances were slim, my mother was living paycheck-to-paycheck, but I had dreams and aspirations to find myself by breaking away from the turmoil of my family. I joined the Army at seventeen. I had a vicious appetite to see the world, to master it in a way that ensured I wouldn’t have to fit in, and instead could successfully step out of it. My decision to join the Army saved me from a life in the streets of New Jersey, but it also complicated my impression of the world. I suddenly found myself a soldier, this war-made violent machine, but I was also a body as object. Male soldiers would point out my weaknesses, the ways I differed from them, the way my womanhood was a flaw to be corrected.

I first started my medical training in the Army’s Medical Center and School in San Antonio, Texas, before moving on to public universities to complete training in radiologic

technology with a focus in vascular intervention. In “Hindrance,” I describe the first time I saw a person die during my deployment to Kosovo on a United Nations mission, and what it felt like to be helpless when I should’ve been able, with my experience and education, to save that person. Extensive wounds are life threatening and I know it is not my lacking in medical knowledge that prohibits me from saving everyone I encounter in my career, but it is the wound these deaths leave within me that feels pertinent to my story.

In my essay, “A Brain-Dead Body,” my life in medicine crashes into my life between societal boundaries, where an undocumented immigrant has a brain hemorrhage and dies without me ever learning the patient’s name. It feels urgent, pressing even, for me to write this person’s story because while I have a legal status and citizenship in this country, I have more in common with the patient than I do with the other doctors, scrub techs, and nurses in the operating room. This story has bigger implications, and with the current fear mongering politics and push to drive immigrants away, people tend to lose track of the fact that they are people, not bodies, and should have as many human rights as everyone else. I have rights, but the significance of these rights lies in the facets of the rules that attach themselves to my so-called freedom of being. I am just as constrained as the undocumented immigrant in the binary of cultural myths and stigmatization.

My marriage to Granger, whose raciality is questioned on a daily basis, is also a border resident, immigrating to the United States in 1996 and joining the Army in an effort to chase his own version of the American dream. The complexity of my own life began to mend with his as our relationship progressed, forcing both of us into new territory, a territory where my whiteness was no longer easily accepted with a Black husband by my side. A fracture began to immerge. I was no longer passing as white. I had to face racism directly. I had to justify my marriage, my

choice of husband to everyone, and this manuscript is the product of finding my way by inhabiting two voices, that of what I was and of what I was quickly becoming.

In Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1981), he writes of consenting, as a writer, to inhabit two voices at once: "the voice of banality (to say what everyone sees and knows) and the voice of singularity (to replenish such banality with all the élan of an emotion which belonged only to the myself) (76). This is a very important aspect of my creative process, because it allows me to place myself in the world, to examine how people perceive me and to express how I identify within and without it. The exterior purview of my position in the world is captured within my stories, and they are important as, what Barthes calls *studium*, or the general interest in the body and consciousness of a single human, but the quality of my unique experiences pierce the piece as *punctum*, or the specific material that pierces the reader for its complexity and pain (26).

I appear to be a white woman from a middle-class family. This is the general interest in my body, the perception of others, and when I look in the mirror, I can see what they see. However, the truth of what I am is written into my essays, that which pierces the generalized picture of humanism, the darkness of my ancestors, the darkness of my husband, the embedded cultures of my immigrant parents, and the ten years I resided within the body of a female U.S. Army soldier. It also challenges the concept of race by my purposeful withholding of my husband's skin color until well into the manuscript. The theme of withholding and instead focusing on the body as a vehicle was influenced by the writings of Claudia Rankine in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). The language chosen is meant to bring visibility to the myths and ideals attached to the body and race. It is meant to exploit the reader in the same ways we inherently exploit each other through communal and societal teachings. Rankine writes, "Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present" (p. 49). I

wanted to ensure, through language, that we are present regardless of skin color and gender in these essays. My “words work as release—well-oiled doors opening and closing between intention, gesture” (p. 69).

Daniel Dennett, in his 1992 novel *Consciousness Explained*, speaks of consciousness as being a physical phenomenon. The body receives information in multiple streams and that which wins to become the prominent stream is what he describes as a multiple drafts theory. In an effort to coordinate my perception of the world to my physical location within it, I have written these stories that best reiterate my borderland. “Our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories, and more particularly connecting and controlling the story we tell others - and ourselves - about who we are... Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source” (p.418). The stories in this manuscript are birthed from the receptors in my skin and their accumulation in my brain throughout my life. I have chosen the most famous moments of my life because they have impacted my life in inexplicable ways. The stories set forth define the connection I have made through this writing process of self-discovery of mind and body, and of body as a vehicle for change, for myself and culturally. Interestingly, these personal moments are important for the majority of human existence in an intersectional capacity where several layers of individualism become universal.

I found one author in recent years, Joyce Oates, who writes about the mind-body problem in her two main characters in *The Tattooed Girl* (2003). The story is fictional and narrated in a free indirect style that allows us to become part of each character’s stream of consciousness in the first person while allowing for third person narrative without pause, the zooming in and out of the focus of the narrative. The mind-body problem presents itself as what a person is thinking

versus what they say and do. It is the reconciliation of the mind as separate from the body, the harmony of being complete. I have included the stream of consciousness technique in *Deep Down*, because it further complicates the way a character sees the world, but I chose to approach it from the *I*, in the first person, because of the narrative's proximity to myself as person and writer.

I did not know what was at risk in this manuscript at the beginning. The first few classes I attended were focused in poetry, and I began to notice a pattern of words, and of womanhood. The struggle of my life always jumps onto the page; it demands to be written into my stories whether in metaphor or straightforward language that dares the reader to turn away. In these classes, I began to write of nuance, detail, and moments of clarity and of confusion as a conscious being. A professor of poetry encouraged me to saturate myself in the *duende* of language that blooms in the consciousness; *duende* being a state of emotions or a dark and oppressive force first expressed in Federico García Lorca's poetry. Many of the short stories that come together to create "Malfunctioned Muliebrity" originated during these *duende* workshops where I was unapologetic for my feelings as a woman and mother, where I refused to hide the discomfort of what I am.

It is as Mario Vargas Llosa writes in his book, *Letters to a Young Novelist* (2003), "certain writers expand our understanding of human existence, not just quantitatively but in a qualitative sense too" (83). I believe my manuscript does this in its best moments. It proves an expansion of the being as human by the changes sometimes posing a threat to the body throughout one's life; the brilliance of cells and mechanical capabilities being pushed to their limits by a learned consciousness and a reactive brain as human life progresses.

The spatial point of view is closely monitored in my manuscript (44). It happens from within the body and sometimes to microscopic, cellular levels. This is pertinent to the revolving themes of *Deep Down* for many reasons. First, it is from the constraints of this body that I have experienced the entirety of these stories. Secondly, it is a way to squeeze the narrative into uncomfortable spaces. Lastly, it is symbolic to the overarching theme that the wisdom gained from oppression is identifiable but predisposed in the body, and outside of the narrator and reader's control.

The "Chinese box" technique, also explained by Vargas Llosa, was introduced into my manuscript and has become a prominent technique throughout. Many of the essays in *Deep Down* are a combination of multiple themes and multiple stories. In "The Science of a Cell," I link pigment cells to jail cells. "Sensations," however, is my most successful attempt at using the *matryoshka* or "Chinese box" technique (101). I combine short stories that would not fit together without the element of race and the world's impression of it, the feelings being so similar for me between my son being born with white skin and the racist remarks of my neighbor. Instead of using roundabout language to drag out a story I feel is important, I engage direct, concise, almost brutal language that points directly at the problems without allowing the reader a reprieve to look away.

It is the mind that creates and retains knowledge, that has giving me the ability to write this manuscript, but it is also the mind that can debilitate this idea of human expansion, that the subtleties in my life could have prohibited the deeper understanding of the body and breath I create in these essays. T Clutch Fleischmann in his essay, "Ill-Fit the World" (Bending Genre 48), writes, "the role of knowledge is not so much to inform, but to *encourage exploration*, especially when that exploration leads us further into the place we call the margins." This is

where I found my commonality in multiply essays, the thread that connects one moment to the next in a way that is unbreakable, a place in the margins of society you rarely see in literature, the instability and uncertainty of human life through the body and not around it. This is where I discovered why I think and feel in this unique openness through my introspections as a writer of the hardships I've encountered and how I've come to reconcile the pain as a past on the page, a pain that no longer lodges itself within my body.

The manuscript I was able to create is best described in the words of Kazim Ali, who writes in his essay "Genre-Queer", "The text is a body because it is made of the flesh and breath and blood of a writer" (Bending Genre 28). My text is created by suturing together bodies of different origins, but in search of the same thing, acceptance into, and a place within the larger structure of life. It is an exploration of origins and of endings.

This is the point of reconciliation of the whole, the point of explosion, where the pinnacles of my life: my family, my husband, my children, my career, and my military experience collide. It is within this body that I first "seek to understand, then be understood" (Covey 255). The interior perspective of this manuscript is similar to immersive journalism, where I am not writing to escape real life by writing fiction, and instead have invested myself to discovering what is at the root of stigmatizations, misogyny, racism, parenthood, and death.

I briefly mention the arguments with my mother in "Father" about sharing so many of my secrets with readers. She is constrained by her upbringing, by the discouraging nature of cultural ideals where the private should never be public. But because of this upbringing, she has raised me in a way that allows my writing to explore the deepest thoughts, good and bad, as therapy, and as a way of synergizing with other humans in the world and perhaps creating harmony.

David Lazar in his essay, “Queering the Essay” says, “It is also a form that asks for secrets to be exposed, feelings to be explored, memory to be reconsidered, and gender roles to be stretched...for outlandish, strange, unsympathetic or merely whimsical ideas to emerge as we adapt or adopt personae, and extend the reach of our empathetic imagination” (Bending Genre 17-18). With this in mind, the essays in *Deep Down* are sometimes only connected through my body, from which the growth moves outward. It is how I have been successful in linking mundane things such as a tiny spider on my dashboard to my father’s abuse in “10 Things My Father Taught Me for My 10th Birthday,” the two opposite events inhabiting very similar spaces within my mind, that of fearing the unknown and the fear of the known.

I am deeply influenced by Eleni Sikelianos’ *The Book of Jon* (2004), where she reiterates what she knows of her father Jon who overdoses in a hotel room after losing to a terrible drug addiction with what she has heard about him from family members and from what she finds in the pockets of his clothes when she identifies his body. The shadow character of my father is a potent symbol of the danger that follows my life through this narrative, but it also represents betrayal and uncertainty, the way we grow into adults and discover those we love are flawed beyond repair, or in my father’s case, someone who doesn’t love enough to see past his racist mentality to accept our Cuban identity and my husband’s Trinidadian heritage. My father is the hole in my family as Sikelianos writes, “It matters that there are holes in a family history that can never be filled, that there are secrets and mysteries, migrations and invasions and murky bloodlines” (x). He is represented in my narrative as bubbles, the saturation of them rising to threatening levels within my body tissues in the essay “Deep Down.”

The shape of *Deep Down* allows for play in narrative techniques used and for aesthetic white space to push back against the significance of race sprinkled throughout the essays. Some

essays are short, some are longer, and some are lyrical, but they combine in the constant themes of breath, of color, of the danger in scuba diving and its equally dangerous counter stories of domestic violence and sexual assault. Breathing comes so naturally to the body that it is readily taken for granted. But when you lose that ability or someone forcefully takes it from you, you begin to understand that the next breath isn't guaranteed, that the body is not indestructible.

The trope of driving and of sitting in a car surfaces in almost every essay. The car becomes a weapon; the obsession with motion, of the dangers of driving, of the deep-rooted anxiety I feel when I drive and have to rely on others to drive just as safely. This is not a new concept to humanism and Western culture. Hunter S. Thompson in his gonzo-journalistic rendition of chasing the American dream in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) writes of man-made Las Vegas, "We came out here to find the American Dream, and now that we're right in the vortex you want to quit... You must *realize*... that we we've found the main nerve" (47-48). The main nerve of the American Dream is artificial and it is culturally acceptable to chase it for the entirety of one's life even if you never catch it. I am guilty of this want of movement, of wanting to find the answers to life's problems, and of discovering that it is all meaningless anyway; the constant agitation and advancement of my person keeping me from what is truly at stake, from discovering the importance of soul and awareness over body and labels.

For nights, I would sit and picture the moments of memory in my essays; consider where I was, what I was feeling, and who was around me. This habit of introspection, learned in my years trying to accomplish my Master's Degree, has been extremely beneficial to the writing process. As Dinty W. Moore asks in his book *Crafting The Personal Essay* (2010) about writing the memoir essay, "What have you forgotten?" (36). The forgotten of my life sits in the margins of this manuscript like a guillotine, in the silence of what is left unsaid. It is the negative

memories that surface first, but I have found in the writing process, that beauty can be found in the moments when the demons begin to quiet and the beauty of your environment lingers behind; the quiet moment with my brother at the end of “One Breath”, the life I choose over myself, my daughter’s, in “Malfunctioned Muliebrity.”

Recreating my life in this memoir manuscript has always been less about me, as a person, and more about the societal restrictions placed on my body. It is also about the journey to living within society without having to conform, even if this nonconformity has caused the persecution of my existence within the world. Barthes writes, “Lineage reveals an identity stronger, more interesting than legal status—more reassuring as well, for the thought of origins soothes us, whereas that of the future disturbs us, agonizes us” (105). I chose to work through my lineage in reverse and directly through my body, such as to close the gap between what my body really is and why my consciousness flows uniquely in a stream of memories that created a path to the future. It is the past that was agonizing for me, but the fragility of a future still teeters on the edge of unknown, as I describe in my essay “The Life of a Lung Nodule”.

The manuscript begins with “Suspicious Activity” and in the point of view of an outsider, a stranger, who assesses my family from the other side of a field and decides we are dangerous. I do not switch to the first person narrator until after the police are dispatched, because I feel it is important to show multiple views of the same story. The unsaid here, or the *duende*, of racial politics is so deeply rooted that people do not realize they are perpetrating or adding to the issues we face as a society.

The conclusion I find in the final edits of *Deep Down*, is that what is at risk sits in an intersection of gender, body, morality, loss, hardships, and identity. Eleni Sikelianos beautifully states that the crux of what we know sits within our families, “these *are* the people we know,

however badly we know them” (37). We do not choose who we come from, but we can chose to be more open and understanding, patient with each other in a way that begins to heal the riffs between each individual person and our community.

In the years between infancy and adulthood, I was tested in ways that now influence my consciousness. I was pushed to the limits of each intersection, and left in the margins by those who refused to understand me as a person and not as a representation. My ultimate goal in writing these unapologetic personal stories is to bring awareness to the severity of our influence on each other and the pressure we place on individuals through the control of their bodies. In an effort to achieve autonomy, I traveled within my body in search of the truth, and while I have faced exclusion from multiple levels of class and economy, I found that the existential crisis I first believed belonged to me is superfluous to the frame and structure of my anatomy. This manuscript is the effort of my spiritual transcendence into the realm of comfort and acceptance of what was and what may one day be, in words I was once not able to express for the barriers of cross-cultural immigration.

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Chapter 1: Suspicious Activity

It starts with a call: suspicious activity at a local middle school track meet.

The caller is watching his daughter run track where a suspicious man has entered the field's gate to join a family in the bleachers. The man in question is walking with eyes downcast and a nasty frown on his face. He doesn't make eye contact or greet any of the other track parents. The caller watches the man interact with a family as he side steps into the silver bleachers. The family sitting in the top row closest to the fence seems to know the man. They cheer for him as if he's a competitor on the field, throwing their arms up and whooping as he gets closer.

[Caller inserts here that the family doesn't appear to be local. The caller describes them as "rowdy".]

The suspicious man proceeds to pick up a squirming white boy of around two years of age. The other children, already seated with an older black woman, jump from the stands to rush the man in question. There are five other kids in total: a white girl and four black girls ranging in size from kindergarten through middle school. The kids stumble over each other in the small spaces between benches, banging the fence in the process, and disrupting the track meet.

The excitement of the toddler lifts the man's shirt exposing a large black gun in a low-slung holster looped through a thick black belt at the man's waist. The man in question proceeds to sit and makes no move toward the gun, but the caller reports the actions appear staged. The caller consults with the parents on the opposing team's bleacher and asks them to evaluate the man. He indicates the man he is worried about by pointing when he sees their heads bobbing around in search of the target, but it catches the man's attention. The man in question lifts a cell phone to his ear as he shuffles out of the bleachers and toward the exit. The other parents nod

their heads empathically as they follow the man with their eyes; they agree with the father that there is cause for alarm, prompting the call to the local police department.

[Caller inserts here that the man is intimidating and won't stop staring at him. "He looks mean," the caller says, "we're just worried about our kids."]

The description given: a heavily armed Black man carrying a light-skinned toddler, around 5'9" tall, wearing a red Under Armour T-shirt and jeans; last seen walking out into the parking lot.

I pull into the parking lot in a rush to catch my daughter's last run after work. My husband is there, walking out to the minivan with our son on his hip, one hand locked around his body as he holds the hand of our nine-year-old with the other.

"Where are you guys headed?" I ask from my lowered window.

"She has soccer practice so I'm taking her to change in the van," he replies.

I park my car and start walking toward them when sirens approach from around the corner. A police cruiser steers into the parking lot and stops, but never manages to nudge into a spot as if the officer is in a hurry. The officer steps out and strides toward my husband standing just outside our van.

"Excuse me, sir," the cop asks, one hand on his holster, "do you have identification?"

"Yes, of course I do," my husband replies in a voice that masks his accent.

He puts our son down so he can reach into his pocket and retrieve his license. The cop explains he has been dispatched in response to a call of an armed man on the school track that matches my husband's description. I pick up our son and step a few paces away from the

exchange, turn away with our son and quiet him down with a bounce so we don't distract the officer.

"Are you armed?" The cop asks.

"Yes, I am, officer," my husband replies as he reaches into his pocket again, this time for his carry permit and work ID. He hands it to the police officer as he works to get his badge off the belt cinched around his waist.

"Do you know the school's policy on firearms?" the officer asks in a steely voice as he maneuvers himself between the entrance of the field and my husband's body.

"Yes, there is an exception in the policy for law enforcement personnel."

"Has the school approached you about the weapons policy?"

My husband tells the officer they never had because he usually visits in uniform on his way home from work. The police officer seems a bit sheepish as he apologizes to my husband. He turns toward me, really seeing me for the first time in my scrubs with a hospital badge clipped to my collar that my son keeps pulling and releasing. It makes a snapping sound every time it reaches the metal piece at my neck that reads *The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center*.

He leans around my husband, tips the brim of his shiny black visor in my direction, and says "Ma'am", as if it would have been rude not to acknowledge the wife of a fellow officer. And he's right, if it had been his wife, he would've been appalled by the behavior, demanded the courtesy for his wife. I nod in return, holding my son a little looser before finally putting him down and walking over to introduce myself, forgiving the impoliteness in the sauntering walk and extended hand of my body. Our son runs to his father and demands to be scooped up again. He hugs his father's neck with his slim arms and looks at the officer.

“Hi,” I say as I shake the officer’s offered hand, “Jess Granger.”

He informs us he has to call in my husband’s name and license number because he has been dispatched for a serious threat pertaining to children participating in afterschool activities.

“You can never be too sure these days,” I say in a shaky voice that barely contains the nervousness I’m feeling.

My husband grabs my hand to soothe me when he recognizes the tone of my voice. He thanks the officer and turns back toward the entrance to the field and our family in the bleachers. I can hear the officer’s report in the distance as he pushes the tiny black buttons on the sides of his radio and makes the call.

Conclusion: an “all clear” given. The man in question is a Deputy Sheriff. Has his badge visible and attached. To the service pistol on his hip. He is attending his oldest daughter’s track meet in civilian clothing.

Chapter 2: Sensations

They walk up closer to my back. So close I can feel them stir the air behind my head as they stress me with their presence.

My husband and I are at Secrets Cancún Resort for a wedding. His Army buddy is getting married today. We're strolling to the rehearsal dinner and consider how unusually busy the resort is for a festival called "Jump-off" taking place in downtown Cancún. There are three women behind us, walking from their room close to ours down toward the exit of the resort. I don't immediately feel their presence as we amble toward the rehearsal, walking hand-in-hand slowly, my body bumping into his when I miss a step and him reaching out to steady me each time. We're having a quiet conversation about work and how trauma season seemed to start early for me this year. I'm happy to get away from reality for a while and submerge myself in the sea with him on a scuba excursion off the coast of Mexico after the wedding.

I can hear their flip-flops slapping the ground in rapid succession behind us and I pull to the side to let them pass, but they don't pass us; they wait. We take off again, but my muscles are tense within my skin, my own tautness forcing me to walk upright and in cadence with my husband. Gone is the amble and soft-spoken conversation between us.

"Do you see this bitch," one says to the others.

"Yeah, we see her. Who does she think she is, stealing one of ours?"

I lean in and turn my face toward his ear when he puts his arm around me.

"Are these women behind us talking about me?" I ask him.

"I'm not sure," he responds.

One of them speaks loud enough to be heard down the corridor. "Get your own, white girl; He belongs with one of us."

I look around the walkway. We're the only people around. I roll my eyes, signaling to my husband that they are indeed talking to me but he just walks faster and starts to drag me along with him.

"I bet he has an education and a good job with benefits, they always go for the white women," one says.

"Or maybe not, she probably pays his way like the idiot she is," says another.

The stinging ricochet of my aunt's palm as it makes impact with my face in the bathroom of my parent's wedding.

The DJ announces us as we walk into the reception. My parents, just married, walk in last, coming through a bridge made of our outstretched arms and taking a bow at the end. I walk to my assigned table with my brothers as I wave to our distant relatives already sitting at their tables spread throughout the low-lit hall.

Instead of sitting, I redirect to the bathroom to check on my makeup and hair with my best friend Travée. My aunt, wife to my uncle, follows me into the bathroom, her pudgy toes peeking through her shiny silver stilettos that strike the flooring with force from the weight they are bearing. She's there when I come out of the stall, leaning against the ivory wallpaper of the bathroom.

"Hey, Aunt Teri, how are you?" I ask.

"I'll tell you how I am," she says as she pushes me with two hands on my shoulders into the back corner of the bathroom and slaps me across the face, "how dare you not tell me you got divorced?"

Travée is watching the exchange in the mirror, the reflection of what is occurring not downplaying the significance of the moment. I can see her over my aunt's shoulder. Her glossed red lips hanging open in shock, the blue of her dress deepening as anger blushes her arms, the skin around her dark eyes tightening before she spins around so fast her black chignon tilts on her head. I put a hand up to hold her off, shake my head side-to-side just an inch, thinking, *Travée will beat this woman*, aunt or not, if I don't stop her. What I haven't told you is that Travée and I met when we became roommates on an Army deployment, the bond between us deeper than any two friends, deeper than the amount of subcutaneous fat riddling my aunt's aging body.

I return my focus to my aunt's bulging, ruddy face, and consider a response. If I say what I really want to say to her, it will cause a scene at my mom's wedding, the wedding my mother has been waiting for all these years. My stepfather judges my brothers and I for breaks in tradition, but the truth is, my mother has been waiting close to twenty years to marry my stepfather, and now that the day has arrived, I refuse to ruin it by fighting with an aunt I never see. On the other hand, if I don't give my aunt a response that will placate her she will make a scene anyway.

"I'm sorry," I begin with two hands up, palms facing her as I try to hold her off, "I have been trying to pick up the pieces of my life and I haven't had time to call anyone."

"I heard he wasn't good to you, I'm sorry to hear that," she says as her bright blue eyes shift towards the floor for just a second.

"It's okay, Aunt Teri, these things happen."

"What's this I hear of you getting remarried already?"

“Yes, it’s what’s best for me and my daughter,” I say, slowly lowering my hands to my sides. I don’t want to fight with her.

“That’s impossible, you can’t be marrying the guy you walked in with, you’re a racist,” she tells me.

“Racist? What would make you think I’m racist,” I ask incredulously, one hand flying back up to my chest as I try to contain the shock.

“My niece was dating a black guy when you guys were younger and you called her a whore.”

I think back to the day she concluded I was a racist. I was barely a teenager, maybe thirteen years old, and I had to compete with her nieces for her attention.

“If I did call your niece a whore it’s probably because she was acting like one, not because she was dating a Black guy,” I say.

“Well, you can’t expect me to approve of this,” my aunt responds.

“I didn’t ask for your approval,” I tell her.

“You can’t trust them,” she whispers, low enough to be secretive. “I know these things from when I was younger.”

I look past her to see if Travée’s heard the racist remark, but I can’t tell, because the look on Travée’s face hasn’t changed since she witnessed the slap and eyed what I can guess from the stinging on my face is a large red, welt blooming on my cheek.

“I’m so sorry for you,” I say as I try to maneuver around her by squeezing between a wooden frame on the wall and her body, but she grabs my bicep and squeezes to hold me in place, our fronts touching, the silk of my red bridesmaid’s dress snagging on the silver zipper of her jumper.

“Whatever you do,” she says, “don’t have any children with him, and if you do, make sure you don’t bring them to my house.”

Travée shuffles closer. I can see her lifting each foot high and lightly placing it back on the tile. She positions herself behind my aunt, ready to yank my aunt away from me if she tries to attack me again. I turn my body in an attempt to create more space between my aunt’s body and mine. My elbow connects with her stomach and the momentum forces her back a step. It’s just enough to free myself.

I manage to wrench my arm away and open the bathroom door, letting Travée walk through before me. I make it back to my table in time to watch as aunt Teri leans down to Granger, her pink streaked blonde hair haloing his face as she gets close to him and introduces herself. He shakes her hand and smiles, but all I can see is her hurting the son I will have with him, that same wide smile one of our son’s best features, because of a past she can’t let go of.

The gray fear coloring the eyes of my neighbor’s face as she describes the man she thinks is breaking into homes in our small subdivision.

Marcy, my neighbor, tells me someone’s car was recently vandalized. There’s a man running through the subdivision that scares her.

I ask if she’s called the cops.

She hasn’t.

“Why are you worried about a guy running through the subdivision,” I ask as I rub my very pregnant belly. I’m due in a few months and this news concerns me.

“Because he runs for hours, past my front door over and over again with his head toward my house as if he’s looking inside.”

I stop to consider if I’ve seen this man.

“What does he look like?” I question.

“I don’t know, he’s bald, runs at night,” she says.

I laugh a little at her description. There are plenty of ageing men in the subdivision. Most of us are married with several children. Her description accounts for at least half of the men in the neighborhood.

“Has he stopped to talk to you?” I ask Marcy.

“No, he has headphones in,” she tells me.

“Do burglars usually commit crimes with music playing?” I jokingly ask.

Marcy huffs in frustration that I’m not taking this seriously. She tells me I should be more worried than she is with a new baby on the way. I shrug a shoulder at her.

Granger has just gotten up from his night shift and comes to join me outside. I step away from Marcy to introduce him to everyone at the block party since he’s fairly new to the neighborhood, and head back to Marcy to introduce the two.

“This is the guy I was telling you about, my new husband, Granger,” I say.

Marcy is overly polite, gushing over meeting him, tossing her auburn curls over her shoulder in a look at me, I’m being charming sort of way. She slaps Granger on the shoulder and pulls him toward her; tells him she’s heard so much about him. I’ve known Marcy for as long as I’ve lived in my house and I know from experience that she isn’t a nice person. She’ll smile in your face as she calls the HOA about a shingle that is loose on the siding of your house. She’ll

seem shocked when I show her the letter from the HOA with the hefty fine written in red on the front, but I'm truly curious about this performance because she doesn't usually get this flustered.

I used to perform in this same manner. My ex-husband and I moved into this subdivision together before I asked him to leave. Marcy would smile at us and wave in each passing around on her walks with friends. I'd smile back and wave empathically, practically begging with the motion for her to stay on the street so she didn't get close enough to see me.

Granger excuses himself to talk to his mother and leaves me with Marcy. She drops the smiles and replaces it with a sharp look in Granger's direction. I follow her gaze and watch him, try to see what she's seeing that has her so upset. I gesture toward him, my swollen fingers stiff as I move them. Marcy follows the motion with a squinted gaze.

"Is that the guy you're talking about?" I ask her.

"That's him," she says accusingly as she turns red from embarrassment, "Why does he run every night?"

I laugh.

"Oh, he's practicing," I say, "so when he's being chased by the cops he can get away. You know cops are shooting people freely right now, especially black men."

"I don't mean to offend you, Jess, but you have to understand where I'm coming from. It's disconcerting to see him run past my door so many times each night," Marcy says in her defense as she stamps one white leather sandal on the concrete.

The way the bright, white hue of my son's skin makes my eyes squint as I see him for the first time.

My husband is almost as pale as our son as he watches the baby being born and then handed to him. Our son is finally here and healthy, the genetic roulette a shock for both of us as we see him wrapped in a tiny blanket. It's Granger's first child, my second. I ask if everything is okay but he doesn't answer, doesn't come over and kiss my forehead like in the movies. He doesn't tell me I did a great job or that he's proud of me. In fact, for six hours after the delivery, my husband sits by my side, but doesn't say anything at all. The lady processing his birth certificate needs a signature from each parent and enters the room with a wide smile and kind face. She holds the pen out to Granger first. My husband laughs. Holding the tiny infant in his ebony palms, he jokes that he has no idea if the boy is actually his. We have a great laugh over it, but I can still feel the guilt of a crime I didn't commit.

The Deputy's harsh words flood my cochleae, their vibrations lingering as he recites one half of the divide.

It's St. Patrick's Day. Granger and I are out with some soldiers for the anniversary of the end of a deployment to Iraq. He and I are on the dance floor locked pelvis to pelvis as we bend to the music. He spots a coworker and claps palms with the guy, brings him over to meet me.

Granger puts his arm around my waist and introduces me to the man. The guy starts to laugh as if it's a joke. I shoot my hand out and shout that it's nice to meet him over the music pumping through the tent just outside the bar. He accepts my hand and pulls me in toward his chest. He's a big guy, at least six feet tall with a wide chest and muscular shoulders, light eyes that shines as the spotlights swing back and forth over the crowd.

"You can't be *his* wife," he slurs.

"I am, indeed, *his* wife," I say.

“It’s impossible!”

“Why is it impossible?” I ask, knowing what he’s thinking.

“Because he’s an Obama lover and you’re white.”

I assure him that I’m still his wife even if he agrees with the Black president’s policies, but the guy is in such shock that I think he might pass out over it. He’s shifting back and forth unsteadily with a half empty drink in his hand. I try to walk away from the awkward meeting, but he follows me, refuses to let go of the hand I offered in greeting.

“You know, Granger means well, I’ll admit that, but he’ll never make it,” he says with fire in his eyes.

The shush, shush, shush of the Velcro on the black bulletproof vest he cinches over his white undershirt as he gets ready for work.

I’m watching him get ready in the mirror. He gives me a kiss on his way out of the bathroom and I follow behind. I wave goodbye at the door as I watch the silhouette of his stiff-brimmed hat fade into the darkness outside. I send up a quick prayer for his safety after last night. The vest is going to protect him from the bullets even if it can’t stop the words from entering his skin.

That hopeless feeling that pierces the heart when even those closest to you don’t understand.

Granger and I are on a Carnival cruise with my daughter for her tenth birthday. Two of our friends from California are with us. We’re eating dinner at the five-person table set for us reiterating some of the most recent hateful comments Granger and I have heard from people. One

of our friends says he knows why people will always act that way toward us. He has the answer and I'm curious.

“Okay,” I say, “let’s hear it.”

“People wouldn’t care so much if you weren’t so light and he wasn’t so dark. It’s the difference in your skin color that really bothers people, that’s the problem,” he says.

I have a distinct memory of the first time I saw Granger. He was in his physical training uniform at our Army unit, the giant A stamped to the grey t-shirt glowing on both sides as his body jumped with each stride of his jog. The black sweatpants of his uniform blended into the early morning dimness, so I could only true see the shirt in motion. He crossed the finish line and slowed his body enough to prevent a collision between us. I watched as he lifted both arms and stretched first one flank and then the other. Sweat beaded his skin in the early morning light as his body bent. He seemed to glow, the water droplets collecting, and rolling down his dark skin before disappearing into the grass. It was beautiful, the darkness of him repelling the light like a beacon to my sense.

The fear in that final moment, that I'd never see him again, that I'd never feel the heat radiate from his smile or hold his hand, that I'd never tell him I love him; that I would never be able to say good bye.

I'm driving home from the hospital after a normal shift in the operating room. I get in my car, start an audiobook, and put the tiny car in gear as I head out into the cold Ohio winter night. The snow is unapologetically pelting the windshield in the darkness as I steer toward the East.

The city is already sleeping. I'm mostly alone on the highway. The lights of downtown Columbus are neon spikes that penetrate my sunroof every few seconds. Factories operating on the night shift are expelling large clouds of smoke into the air in the distance.

Heading up over the bridge, I read the sign "Bridge freezes before road surface." I look down at the glowing thermostat on my dashboard, 17 degrees. I can see the sharp bend in the road as I listen to a sermon reading by Reese Witherspoon as Harper Lee's character Jean Louise battles with her own understanding of why the preacher was pleading with everyone to *Go Set A Watchman* when I hear the explosion.

The car hits a ridge in the pavement, the unbalanced pressure of the hot rubber causing the tire to rupture like a gunshot from the back-left corner. The car begins careening over the lanes. I clench the steering wheel, attempting to steady the car, but the uneven level of the top-heavy car sends it into a tailspin.

I see the rear of the car starting to lose traction and bend around. I downshift gears to slow the car down. I can't slow down in time to right the car. It spins anyway.

The propulsion sends me back and forth across the lanes like a pinball. All I can do is counter the motion of the angry car in the hopes of preventing a roll over. For a while it works, but my arms grow tired and I close my eyes as I start to lose hope of regaining control.

It's amazing how a moment can seem like a lifetime, how after fifteen years of friendship and four years of marriage it could be gone, just like this, on a wet solitary bridge in the middle of an uninteresting city. I want to call him. I want to look in his eyes as the impact boomerangs from the tips of my fingers on the steering wheel, up my spine, and through my body until the world fades into blackness, but the color never takes hold.

I open my eyes and track the snowflakes as they fall in front of my wildly swinging headlights as my car seems to sigh in relief and stop.

I move the car to the side of the highway with sparks flying from the rim as it grounds into the asphalt in a loud cry. Then, I make that phone call.

I wait for him, muscles tense inside the seatbelt that holds me like an old friend as my car shaking with each passing vehicle. I'm trapped by the cold, the fear, the narrow shoulder of the high bridge. To the right, cars are racing down the path at an easy sixty or seventy miles per hour, and to the left, crisp smooth air and a steep fall to the highway below.

He knows about my previous accident, the one just like this that I never fully recovered from, the one that broke the bones of my face, the one that forces me to tackle the demon every day I have to get in my car and go to work.

He arrives quickly, the darkness concealing his face. I know it's him from the swing of his arms and the evenness of his gait. All I can really see in the glare of his headlights is his neon reflective coat with big block letters across the front and back that read "SHERIFF."

I'm pulled up to the railing, in the blind spot of the bridge, facing downward at where the bridge meets its end when he approaches the driver side door. When I roll down the window, I stare up at him and wait.

"Well," he says, "you are in the absolute worst spot for something like this to happen."

I just nod my agreement and speak my first thought aloud.

"We'll figure it out together," I say.

Chapter 3: Random Expressions on Race

The male nurse I worked with who saw my wedding picture as a screensaver on my computer when he entered my office and said, "You're too pretty for that."

The school administrator who wanted to know where my adopted children's real mother was.

The prison guard sitting in the operating room while escorting a prisoner who was upset he could no longer man-handle prisoners due to stricter laws. He said, "I want my America back."

The older woman with two children leaving a Red Robin restaurant who spit in my direction as my husband walked ahead to hold the door.

The female nurse who got frightened and called security when she saw my husband waiting in the hall as he accompanied me to the hospital after our dinner got interrupted by an emergency patient.

The customs agent who wouldn't let Granger pass after she left me through. "U.S. citizens only," she said to him. "I am a U.S. citizen and that's my wife," he pointed to no avail. I went back and in a low tone spoke in our native Spanish until she allowed him entry.

The jeweler who asked my adopted daughter, "Who do you look like in your family?"

The female nurse who picked up my daughter when she was an infant and laughed at her jet-black hair and whiskey colored eyes. She said, “She looks just like a Mexican baby.”

The cousin who asked my husband if he liked to play in the snow.

The aunt at the funeral in Trinidad who informed me my son looked nothing like her nephew.

The joke I make when someone is shocked by the size of our son. I say, “yeah, had to make a baby I knew would get a scholarship to college!”

The young woman who noticed my pregnant belly at the mall and with a smile on her face said, “your baby is going to be so cute, biracial babies always are!”

My ex-husband’s warning about having a baby with Granger. “What will people say if your kids look completely different,” he asked me.

The two employees at a local Chipotle discussing in Spanish how much they hated me because of my privileged life.

The Facebook user that is a friend of a friend and called the NFL players protesting the anthem by kneeling a “Lotta Niggas!” And my husband said, “You seem very comfortable using that word,” to which he responded, “The truth hurts doesn’t it?”

The elderly man at the breakfast bistro in New Zealand who came over to ask me if my travel companion was from Africa. I told him he was not from Africa, but from the Caribbean. My husband said, “We were once African, but they kicked us off of the ship because we were too rowdy to be sold.” The man ignored him and spoke directly to me, “Oh, I’m sorry, I thought...” rubs the side of his white face in a showy way, “he was from Africa.”

The French Canadian surgeon who congratulated me on my new marriage by saying, “Once you go black, you never go back.”

The confusion of my stepfather’s face when I asked him to stop using the “N” word at Thanksgiving dinner.

The ease with which the words, “those are his,” rolls off an old coworker’s tongue when I see her in the hospital cafeteria. We’re talking about our children and the pressure put on them at school to pick careers in their teens. I shake my head and laugh. “I know,” I say, “they are trying to do the same to my 14 year old.” She tells me the four black children in my home belong to my husband. I say, “I can imagine how you’d think that, but he just gets a bad rap. The children are adopted; they all have different fathers and mothers except for our biological son together. “I just assumed,” she stutters and blushes, “I’m going to walk away now.”

A picture of the Obama family with the phrase, “I almost don’t even care what Trump has done, as long as these people are no longer in the White House,” circulating on Facebook.

Chapter 4: One Breath

Breathe in. It's the last thing I do before she pushes me under again. I'm at a birthday party for one of the girls at my school. All of the fifth graders in my town have a separate school called Central 5 before we are split up into the multiple middle schools throughout the territory. She isn't really nice to me, but her family is wealthy and I like to spend my weekends at their house just to feel what it's like to be someone other than myself.

There's a boy named Tim in our class that we both like. He's been paying more attention to me than she appreciates at this party. I'm in the pool, my arms crossed on the tiled ledge, head cradled between them as the sun bakes the left side of my face. I'm talking to another girl perched on the edge of the pool, her legs swirling water beside me, the motion lulling me as we talk. The birthday girl swims over and gets behind me, whispers in my ear, tickling the drying fly-away hairs on my face, "You know I like Tim."

I turn and look at her, shrug my shoulders at her anger as if it doesn't bother me either way.

I do this a lot as a tween, shrug when I feel uncomfortable, when I want to fit in, when I don't want to speak my mind and get rejected by my middle-class schoolmates. Maybe I do it because I tend to slur languages when I become tired or very angry and I find it embarrassing, I don't know. I do it so often, I find myself doing it in the mirror, responding to my own unasked questions when I notice my body starting to change.

My friend doesn't back off. I can feel the heat of her anger through the water. She pushes my shoulders hard enough that I let go of the ledge to avoid hitting my face on the tiles. I turn around to ask what her problem is, but she jumps on me, wraps her arms and legs around mine

like an octopus, our torsos touching as she immobilizes my limbs. I sink into the pool from the weight. I try to get free.

She needs to breathe and finally lets go long enough to pop to the surface. I follow her, sputtering in shock. The other kids start to laugh as they come over to see what's happening, but it just fuels her anger more. She puts her torso on top of my head and pushes me back down, holding me under while she stays above the water this time, laughing with everyone else as I struggle.

My lungs start to burn as I panic. I think she is going to kill me over a boy, one I'd never truly want anyway. *Being a girl is so stupid*, I think to myself as I squeeze both of her calves with my hands in an effort to bring her down into the water with me. The more I fight her, the more the air escapes from my lungs and I realize I'm done, out of air, and at her mercy.

I hear shouting that's loud even beneath the surface before two strong arms covered in gold bracelets that scrape my skin reach into the water and grab for me. I have no energy in my limbs, pulling a caught fish routine as I'm lifted out of the pool. I lay limply on the concrete to catch my breath where the birthday girl's mother manages to drag me. She asks if I'm okay as chlorinated water seeps from my nose and mouth and I whisper the word *mom* from a raw throat.

Breathe out. It's the first thing I do when he enters my room and slams me against the old oak door of my closet. He wrestles my training bra off first, the pink clasp in the front flying open under the pressure of his thick fingers. His mouth is all over me, the nasty stench of his saliva in my nose and coating my teeth as he forces his way inside.

He is trying to shove his fingers into my vagina as I scream, but his father and my mother are at work. His weight suspends my smaller body like an insect on a pin as his hand finally breeches my panties and makes contact.

He's mumbling words as we struggle, me trying to drop my pelvis while he pushes in deep enough to hurt me.

You want it...you've been asking for it...you're a slut.

He is here, he says, to make sure I know exactly how much of a tease I am.

The times I leave the bathroom door open as I lean over, ass up, to blow-dry my hair in a tank top and small shorts. The times I dress in skirts and knee-highs for church on Sundays because I know he likes them.

I sob like a keening animal, beg him to stop, to get off of me, but he just laughs as he leans down to suck my small breast into his mouth. I thrash against him, his teeth burrowing into my skin, the pain forming in thin red circles along my chest and collarbone.

I'm able to gain some leverage and slip out from beneath him when he leans down. I run toward the hall door, but his high school football conditioning gives him the advantage to reach the door first. He slams what little I manage to open shut with my body, smashing my face into the panel, the crystal knob digging into my rib as it bends from the pressure.

I struggle to suck in air through the crushing pressure of his weight. I promise him that I will make sure everyone knows what happened as he grinds his erection into my ass. He chuckles darkly in a voice that no longer cracks and says, "My father says you will never grow up and amount to anything."

I don't respond. He's right; my mother's boyfriend, my acting stepfather at the time, does say those exact words. He says them so often, I too have memorized them. I'm the hypersexual black sheep of our disjointed family. I don't quite fit in. I'm angry all the time.

The front door opens and I can hear my biological brother and his friends rolling their bikes into the front foyer. He releases me suddenly, opening the door, and slowly walking down the hallway and up the attic stairs to his room as if he was just in the bathroom next to my room. I'm still there in the doorway when my brother shuffles up the stairs. He stops to look at me, but my vision gets blurry as tears flood my vision.

He points to my tank top and I look down. The two halves of my bra are pulled through the arms of the tank, stretched to the limit of the fabric. I have red welts on my arms and thighs.

My brother doesn't speak.

He walks over and unscrews the old style latch on the outside of my door, the type that has a long hook that fits into a metal hole on the other side. He gently moves me back into my room and begins twisting the locking mechanism into the wood on the inside of my door jamb with his bare hands. He turns to look at me when it's in place.

"Now, no one can get in unless you want them to," he says, before he leaves and I rush to lock myself in, throw myself back against it and slide slowly to the floor to hug knees to my bruised chest.

Chapter 5: The Trouble with Ancestry

Lauren Lake's *Paternity Court* is blaring in the waiting room of the high-risk obstetrics office. My husband and I are waiting to be called into the genetic counselor's office on the recommendation that, because of our advanced age, we get tested. My physician wants to ensure there are no underlying genetic abnormalities that could further complicate my high-risk pregnancy so we agree to the appointment.

A woman in navy blue scrubs enters the waiting room and looks at us. We are the only two people in the room. She introduces herself as a nurse and asks my husband if he's the father of my child. It startles me for a moment as my husband tells her he is. She asks to speak to me alone as she measures my height, weight, and blood pressure in a small patient room.

There is something about her I find hostile even in the brightly lit room with smiling mothers in a picture frame behind her. Her mouth reminds me of a grunt fish, the way the bottom lip seems to be in a perpetual frown. Maybe it's her questioning, but she tells me it is customary to ask such questions for a first appointment. The rapid-fire of her cadence makes me more defensive than I usually am.

"Do you feel safe at home," she asks.

I just stare back and finally say *yes*.

"Is it okay if we talk in front of the man in the hall?" "Is he your husband?" "Is he supportive?" "Does he abuse you?" "Have you heard any bad news from family members such as a cancer diagnosis recently?" "Is there anything bothering you that you want to discuss with me?"

"These questions," I tell her with crossed arms, "are bothering me."

She doesn't apologize.

I write down her name when she steps out to get my husband. They walk into the room together and we all head to the phlebotomy lab to draw blood before our counseling session. She asks his name and date of birth and compares the information on the vial to his recitation.

Granger, my husband, sits in the chair first. It reminds me of high school with the tiny built-in desks that fold up when you need to get up from the chair. She loops a tourniquet around his arm, a bright blue against his dark skin.

She asks him to make a fist and pump it a few times before she runs her fingers along the crook of his elbow searching for a vein. They're not visible on his skin like they are on mine. The nurse has no problem locating a vein when I sit and make a fist just a minute later.

The genetic counselor picks us up from the lab and takes us to her office. She shuts the door, perches gold wire-rimmed glasses on the end of her nose, and sits behind her large wooden desk, medical texts strewn across the surface as she pulls up a form to begin the interview. She starts by asking if we know of any genetic abnormalities that could affect the baby.

Cystic fibrosis is a disease that shortens a person's lifespan significantly, an average of thirty-seven to our seventy-eight years. I consider my age now, thirty-three, and if fate would have seen it so, I'd be closer to death because of it than I ever would have in all my years of service in the Army.

Cystic Fibrosis alters the lungs, slowly destroys a body's ability to breath. Imagine the feeling of hunger in the morning, when the body is starving from hours of rest. You want to get up and eat something, but maybe you're late to work. So you skip breakfast, and drive as fast as you can. By the time you get there, the pain is gnawing and you can't think straight, your body is doubling over from the need for food, the need to nourish itself. Now take that feeling and transfer it to your lungs. Picture breathing through a straw, never wanting to get older because

then the straw would get smaller and it will hurt more, and your lungs will fill with fluid and eventually drown you.

I learned I was a carrier of Cystic Fibrosis when I was pregnant with my daughter eight years prior to this pregnancy. Both parents must carry the gene for there to be a possibility of the child being born with it, 1 in 4 or twenty-five percent chance at that point, but my ex-husband was not a carrier even with his European ancestry and the risk was nullified for my unborn daughter. It shocked everyone when the test came back positive that first time. “That seems odd,” they told me, “your chances of being a carrier because you’re half-Portuguese and half-Cuban are so slim.”

“I am a carrier of Cystic Fibrosis,” I tell her.

“That’s not really a concern here,” the counselor says positively, “your husband is of black-Caribbean descent.”

She opens a text on genetic abnormalities across racial and cultural boundaries. It’s inclusionary, but broken down into a divisive scientific graph along an axis close to the right margin. She asks where my family is from, how far removed I am from my roots, and points to the possibilities along my ancestry, slides that finger down the page to where the two halves of my identity converge on a set of diseases. I tell her I am a first-generation American.

My mother was born in Chaves, Portugal, and immigrated with her family to the United States in 1972 when she was eleven-years-old. My father was born in Marianao, Cuba, and immigrated to the United States with his family in 1971 when he was seven-years-old. They were married for only four years, and in 1988, they divorced and my mother, brother, and I moved in with her parents.

She holds her finger firmly in place, the skin around her nailbed turning white from the pressure, and turns her attention to Granger asking the same questions.

Granger immigrated to the United States from Trinidad in 1993 when he was seventeen-years-old. His parents are both Trinidadian with tendrils of ancestry with adjoining but extended roots in Venezuela, China, and St. Vincent.

He explains the pattern of babies born to his family with Patent Foramen Ovale, a hole in the heart, but they have done an investigative ultrasound on our son and his heart is healthy and intact. We've seen our son every four weeks since I found out I was pregnant. He seems so vital sometimes, moving around in my womb with enough force to feel it on my skin, but at the same time, his bones appear so white and translucent, almost brittle, during the ultrasounds; you can almost see through his small body.

She takes her other hand and places a finger along his race, drags it down to where my ancestry is highlighted beneath her skin. She compares the two, assesses our compatibility.

"We should do a hemoglobin screening," she tells us at last, "Sickle cell disease and Thalassemia are prevalent in people of West Indian descent and Cuba is not far off Jess."

Hemoglobin is a protein that attaches and carries oxygen to a person's red blood cells. These tests, for Cystic Fibrosis, Sickle Cell, Thalassemia, and others are associated with our ancestry, but the risk to our baby is only concerning if we are both carriers of the genetic abnormalities. We agree to all the tests discussed with the counselor. She checks off the boxes on the form for the lab, small X's in all of the incidental hazards our collective DNA may produce, and shakes our hands as we take the form and walk it back to the lab. I grab a patient survey on the way out.

Chapter 6: 10 Things My Father Taught Me for My 10th Birthday

10. He taught me to be patient.

I argued with my mother for months about letting my brother and I go to Disney with our biological father. She worried about us leaving the state with a man we hardly saw, but I convinced her we would be in good hands because we were visiting my abuelo in Miami, Florida, while we were there. I remember kissing her cheek before I ran to my father's green rental and jumped in. I felt so relieved that after ten years of his absence, my father was finally coming around.

We were in line, waiting to be some of the first people to board the Hollywood Tower of Terror, Hollywood Studio's newest attraction. This new ride brought a palpable excitement to the crowd of people flooding the park. The press was there, snapping photos and taking interviews, and there I was too, standing proudly next to my father in my Minnie ears, waiting to board what seemed like the elevator to the rest of my life.

Hours passed and my legs started to burn from standing motionless against the metal barriers that caged us in like animals. I thought the anticipation of the ride would surely kill me before I could ever step foot in the elevator. I prayed for the line to move faster, for something entertaining to happen and soothe my ten-year-old mind.

9. He taught me not to be afraid.

At the end of several more hours, was that set of elevators. The doors opened and we were ushered into the seats of the front row. As soon as the doors closed, the cabin absconded into darkness and classic Twilight Zone music began to play. The car started to slide forward toward the flashing strobe lights and cresting music. I grabbed for my father's hand beside me,

he accepted the affection and squeezed mine tight in return, trying to reassure me that it was only a ride. He turned his head and smiled at me, whispering that it would be okay.

I sensed the elevator was rising into the sky from the sensation of butterflies in my stomach. It's that feeling you instinctively learn early in life when the car hits a big bump in the road while you're riding in the backseat.

I'll have this same feeling when I'm much older, speeding down a road in Westfield, New Jersey, in a rush to find my daughter a tiara for my sister-in-law's wedding at the last minute. We'll hit a bump in the road, and it'll send her small head bouncing against the fabric of the roof. Her eyes will grow wider as her body dislodges from the seat and I'll watch in the rearview mirror as her face transform into my ex-husband's, their features identical in that moment, the bottom falling out of my stomach in fear when I see that flash of him within her.

The elevator then started sliding forward again before the doors opened suddenly to the outside. The sunshine, blinding, disorienting. I cracked my eyelids just enough to adjust to the light, confused as to what was going on. I could make out palm trees in the distance. I could see identical hotels in neat rows, indistinct and equally monopolizing. The sunshine hurt my eyes so badly I didn't have time to think of what came next; I was focused on the present.

The elevator was released from its hinge, sending us plummeting toward the ground so fast my scalp was receiving a signal of pain from my hair, pulling from the pressure. I can remember screaming the whole way down while my brother laughed at my expense. He laughed so loud and long it lasted for a good twenty minutes after the ride.

He was turning bright red, hunching over, curling into himself as the cramps started to affect him from lack of oxygen.

8. He taught me the importance of a song.

After the ride, with the guys in tow, I went skipping off toward the parking lot. I was just turning around to replay the ride again with my brother when off in the distance I could see storm clouds rolling in over the park like an angry mother on a mission to catch her naughty child. Rain would be coming quickly and violently if the thunder growling high in the sky was any indication of the turn in weather. We had to outrun that storm if we planned to stay dry.

I took off in my jelly sandals, the clear plastic slapping the concrete as I pumped my arms and forced my lanky legs to catch up with my body so I didn't trip as I usually did. My brother had a Yankees hat in his hand that he put on to offer at least a little protection as he passed me. My father didn't run, but I noticed that he picked up his pace and reached the car just a few seconds behind us.

Safe from the storm in our rental, I was heaving from the run. I laid down in the backseat to rest. I put my head in my brother's lap, and for once, he didn't complain. I fell asleep quickly. I slept for what felt like hours but was only really a few minutes if the clock glowing on the dashboard was any true indication of the time. We were stuck in traffic on I-4 in a torrential downpour with lightning striking all around us when I woke up. The windows of the car were sealed up tight, the violence of the lightning making the glass shake.

I watched the play of electric charges jump from cloud to cloud as my father sang along to "Lady in Red" by Chris De Burgh. If I close my eyes now, all these years later, I can still remember the song and the cadence of his voice as he followed along. When the song was over, he reached into the glove compartment for a small envelope he always carried with him. He pulled out a hand rolled cigarette. It was thin as the skin of the volcano I'd made with my mother.

I had a school project earlier in the year. It was the first project I was really proud of. One I can remember distinctly. We worked on it all weekend. My mother and I made Papier-mâché out of newspaper and glue. I would giggle every time she said Papier-mâché because it was probably the first time I heard her speak in French so fluently. I'd ask her to repeat it as we worked.

I watched it dry.

I painted the mound of newspaper a deep brown with a rim of tan around the top. My volcano was complete. I took it to school the following Monday and watched with delight as the baking soda mixed with the vinegar and it erupted.

7. He taught me that a brilliant lighting strike would be forever diminished with the memory of him.

He brought the cigarette to his lips, struck a match, and joined the two in slow motion. Taking his first inhale, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes on a sigh. He made no motion to open the window, and after a few puffs, the smell was starting to envelop me. I settled back down, turning my face in toward my brother's shirt, trying to escape the smell, but I couldn't. I felt as if the smoke was choking me. I couldn't breathe. I sat up, coughing uncontrollably, but managed to ask him if he could please lower the window.

"Papi, please lower the window," I said, but my father's only reply was, "No, I don't want to get my t-shirt wet."

I tried to open the window myself, but nothing would happen when I pressed the little switch. My eyes began to water as I looked over pleadingly at my brother for help. He shrugged

and shook his head in a side-to-side motion as he scooted closer to me. My eyes focused on the glowing dashboard clock.

I counted the seconds of each breath I took. It became a chant and meditation of sorts. I counted, breathing in and out, holding my breath as I prayed for the car to be struck by lightning, for the windows to shatter and release me from the smoke. For every lightning strike touching the Earth, my body was starting to float higher and higher above it in kind, the positive charge of my cells growing weightless under the onslaught.

(6-5). He taught me two jokes.

6. He grabbed a white napkin and poured pepper all over it from the shaker at a Red Lobster the night before Disney.

He asked me, “What does this look like?”

“It looks like black dots, papi,” I said.

“No!” He shouted, “It’s the people at the Million Man March.”

I didn’t know what the Million Man March was. I hadn’t learned about it in my history class at the public school yet so I just watched as he continued. He folded the paper in half down the middle and lined the pepper up in a long row.

“Now, what’s this?” He asked, and without waiting for an answer he knew he wouldn’t get from me, answered his own question.

“It’s the line for the KFC after the Million Man March!”

5. My father, “Why are black people so tall?”

“Good genes?” I said.

“No!” he laughed, “Because they’re knee-grows!”

I repeated the word, *Negros*.

“Like abuela Celeste?” I asked with a smile.

My step-grandmother, the woman my grandfather married after my Cuban grandmother died of breast cancer when I was one, has dark skin and textured hair. She looked black to me. I didn’t understand the difference.

“No,” he scolded me, “she is from the Dominican Republic.”

“There’s a difference. We are different,” he said.

4. He taught me that my future reaction to a spider named Frankie would be part of my gift.

I remember the first time I got in my car and he caught my eye with his erratic movements as he attempted to walk across the black leather dashboard. He was newly hatched and stark white; a speck of a spider that was almost translucent and absolutely adorable. I named him Frankie and decided I’d let him stay. Every morning, when I got in my car, I searched for him on the dashboard, but he preferred the windshield. He worked furiously to spin a web on the glass and I’d try to give him advice because I knew it was impossible to stick the silk of his web to the steep, slippery glass, but Frankie didn’t seem to know the difference. I would go so far as to give him a boost when he would tumble down to the dashboard and start over again. His determination was astounding. We lived this way for a while, him trying to build something that would never stick and me being entertained by his inexhaustible energy, until one day he went missing.

I figured he had moved on from life on my dashboard and forgot about him until today.

I'm stuck in traffic, in a thunderstorm, and Frankie crawls out of the vent closest to my right hand. There is something about the way he carries himself that makes me positive it's Frankie, but he's changed. Long gone is the adorable, white spindly spider that used to fill my morning commuted with laughter. The Frankie I'm looking at now scares me. He's big, with eight legs that seem to extend the length of my palm when I put it up to swat him away. His new body is covered in dark brown hair with black rings around the abdomen. My hands shake with fear as I grip the steering wheel and hold my breath praying he won't come near me.

3. He taught me that I would never again allow my vulnerabilities to be exposed.

I cried harder than I ever had that day. I felt disconnected from my body, disconnected from reality, disconnected from my father. I wanted my mother. I wanted her to hold me to Earth while my adolescent consciousness drifted far away. I wanted to lash out at him. I wanted to hate him.

My head began to tingle, my fingers went numb, and I was desperate as I watched the small orange flame glow, waiting for it to burn out. The paper seemed to regenerate. I could see his eyes drift toward the rearview mirror every few minutes, but he never turned around to fully witness what was happening. I held his gaze each time it turned toward me. It seemed that "objects in mirror are closer than they appear" was as true for my father as it was for the car that day.

2. He taught me that when, in the future, I wake up, at age 19, to a blaze in the grass outside of Echo Company's, 187th Battalion barracks in Fort Sam Houston, Texas, that he would always be on the other side of the symbol.

I'll lace up my boots and leave the building. The sun will still be a figment.

It's only about 5:15 am. The fire is bright in the humid morning air, but I'm unconvinced of what I'm seeing in the grass. I get closer and finally see the outline of the gasoline-soaked swastika. As I reach the corner of the swastika, I begin tracing it with my body, putting a hand out along the axis and almost touching the burning light until I reach the other end. I turn and walk to the next line and begin the motion back toward where I started the journey.

The other soldiers are making their way outside, their faces obscured by the darkness of early morning. I wonder what they're thinking.

I'm scared.

We won't pick our barracks or the unit we are placed in, but I can't deny the majority of us are minorities as I look around.

I'll fall to my knees and wonder if the earth is deteriorating below it.

Lay my head down facing the flames, body parallel to the world I suddenly find myself in. My friend, Brunson, puts a hand to my shoulder and asks if I'm okay. I shake my head as I let him pull me up and into the body he always jokes is a gift from his ancestors.

"Are we safe here?" I'll ask him.

"This is the Army, sweetheart, we're never really safe here."

I'll chuckle at that and let him walk me to formation, me under his long arm, his tall stature dwarfing my smaller one. I'll let the heat of his body warm me from the cold I feel as I pass the smoldering swastika and look away.

1. He taught me to absorb and welcome the blackness of the smoke.

The lighting followed us all the way back to the hotel, even after the rain had stopped. When we finally arrived, and the locks were disengaged, I opened the car door in a flash. I tumbled out, taking big gulps of the sweetest, freshest air I'd ever breathed. I was on my hands and knees struggling to keep myself upright as the gravel bit into my palms and kneecaps. My father took his time getting out of the car, coming around to my side, and whacking me in the back of the head for making a scene in public.

Chapter 7: Malfunctioned Muliebrity

The sights we see and the sounds we hear now have none of the quality of the past.

-Virginia Woolf

I remember feeling guilt the first time I met my daughter. I was told I could never have children and that was true until a medical procedure to treat my endometriosis while I was stationed in Texas left me pregnant by a man I had grown to hate. I decided to keep her, gave him control over my body when I decided to keep the fetus I never thought I would have and refused to give up. I was tentative when they placed my daughter in my arms. Then she opened her eyes as if she knew exactly what was going on and stared up at me with the will of a fighter. I was locked in that aged wisdom she carried in the most beautiful brown eyes I had ever seen.

*

I was headed into Kroger grocery center today and saw a man, anger in his balled fists, his body swelling, his face contorted to fit the fear he was trying to instill in a woman. He stormed away from her as she stood in the middle of the street, palms up in a questioning gesture of his unprecedented eruption, and it made me think of you. I could see myself in her and turned away, huddled deeper into my winter coat, my shoulders caving in toward my center, arms hugging my chest, and I wondered if the approaching car would hit her. Then I realized it didn't matter.

*

My stepfather is a heavy drinker. He had been drinking at Thanksgiving dinner last year when he thought it was a good platform to inject the recent political campaign into our family discussion. He was reeling from excitement that a man who refused to be politically correct would finally put women in their place. He slammed his fists into the table in a thumping sound that enhanced every syllable of his speech. "I'm sorry, but no woman could pull me from a burning building,"

he told me. "Dad, I can pull you from a burning building and I am a woman." "Well, you're different. You're a veteran and you save lives every day," he shouted, spittle flying from the corner of his mouth. I explained many women are braver and stronger than I am, that there are women across the globe just like me, women willing to face danger head on and overcome it. His eyes held mine for a minute when I was done. He lingered in my words as he swayed in the oak dining room chair. When he finally spoke, he said, "You win," but I don't feel like I've won anything.

*

I think part of why I chose a male heavy career is to prove everyone wrong.

*

One day, on a walk in the cold, bitter nowhere of Eastern Europe, a stranger put his hand on my shoulder, right above the stitched American flag on my Army uniform, and recited a practiced statement I asked my interpreter to translate. He said, "I won't walk down the street behind a woman."

*

A woman once told me I could never be a mother and a writer.

*

Without my glasses on, I must lean in close to the mirror and see the real me in clarity. The one who smiles on the outside, who checks every blemish and tells herself it's going to be okay, the woman who traces the lines of her aging face back to the beginning of who she once was before the plastic surgery to repair the injuries to her broken nose after a car accident with a friend.

*

It was very early in one of my pregnancies that I discovered a second line accompanying the first, like the world's most positive equal. I couldn't wait to tell my husband so we could share the joy we'd been hoping for and anticipating for months, which turned into years, which turned into a crimson swirl as it left my womb to mix with the water of the shower floor a few days later.

*

The Army is a lot like miscarriage.

*

There is hope at the beginning of any pregnancy. There is happiness and love. Your expectations are high and you have dreams for the future. You picture the baby and question whose eyes will grace its face. Then suddenly it's gone and you're left to mourn what you never had, the miscarriage process irreversible. You can't catch the bits of blood clot and reform it into a child, push it back into your vagina as if your life had never come apart in the first place. Neither can an Army contract.

*

My defenses have morphed into a gilded cage around me that quivers at the proximity of a man.

*

One day, out of nowhere, I decided I'd had enough. Saying "out of nowhere" seemed to appease everyone who felt uncomfortable walking through a home riddled with holes in the drywall, pretending not to listen to the berating, to the words he truly meant when he was drunk. They said maybe I deserved it, the idea alleviating the pressure within them.

*

Being a single mother was a true test of my feministic ideology.

*

My mother allowed my biological father to go free when she petitioned the court to release him from past and future child support payments as she filed for bankruptcy due to her inability to both feed us and pay her bills. The bill collectors would be calling as I entered the house after school. They'd ask for my mom, but I kept telling them she was at work. "She won't be home until after six o'clock," I'd say, but they kept calling. I'd unplug the phone when my mom got home. I knew she was tired, because I could see her swollen feet stretching the nylon of her stockings when she'd finally sit on the couch. She would never eat until my brother and I had finished our meals. I remember being so angry with her then, because I imagined she was suffering in some way, but she only said, "I'm free," when I asked why she did it.

*

I struggle with my obligation to be there for my children and my obligation to leave them at a moment's notice to be there for my patients.

*

When something goes wrong in brain surgery and they ask me to call one of the guys to fix it.

*

I was stationed at Walter Reed Army Medical Center when I went into labor with my daughter. I was walking the hospital halls, timing my contractions with my ex-husband's watch. They were three minutes apart. I Googled "contractions" and read a few articles about them. I called the Nation Naval Medical Center's maternity ward, where I was supposed to deliver. I told them about my contractions. "Should I come in?" I asked. I was so confused; I had never been in labor before. The lady asked for my pain level, "On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being no pain, with 10

being excruciating pain, how do you rate your pain?" I stopped walking and turned inward. I could feel my daughter shifting around, her small body rotating low in my pelvis. There was bile rising in my throat and I felt nauseous, but I wasn't really in any pain. "Maybe a four ma'am," I said. She laughed at me in a good-natured manner. "Oh sweetie," she said, "you are definitely not in labor if your pain is a 4."

*

I hate the person I pretended to be with you.

*

I was six years old when I discovered Santa Claus was the figment of a dream I could never keep. I'd begged my mother for a toy kitchen. My brother and I were dressed in our blue snowman pajamas and eager to get to bed so we could open presents in the morning, but we never actually fell asleep. A few minutes later, alone, my mother began assembling the kitchen for us as we listened under the covers. I was devastated that Santa wasn't real, but I remember she wanted us to be happy. The next morning I can remember wishing she would be happy too.

*

My drill sergeant had my graduation certificate from basic training in his hands. He looked down at my name, then at me. He asked the crowd who crazy belonged to. The crowd was silent, no one wanted to claim me, and no one understood who I was. As I turned red, my mother caught on and stood proudly. "Jessica, is that you? Are you crazy? I'm crazy's mom!" she kept repeating as she took her place at my side and accepted my accomplishment on the brittle certificate. It was a day no one would ever forget, September 12, 2001. I was seventeen years old. The World Trade Center back home had just been hit by two planes and the buildings collapsed, taking lives and our will to live without the lost with them.

*

I remember the day my daughter Marleigh apologized for the pain I've endured. I became upset with myself because she wasn't supposed to find out. I should have been more discrete, should have lowered the pitch of my late-night sobbing to a dull roar.

*

I took a day off from work to run errands. I went to the courthouse to file for divorce and I had a yearly appointment at my OB-GYN. It was a few days before my 27th birthday. My doctor came in and grabbed my hand, my tiny one being engulfed by his much larger hand. I looked up at him, waited for him to speak. He kept my hand, but rolled a short stool over with his foot and sat in front of me. "How are you feeling?" he asked me. "I'm going through a lot, but I feel better than I have in months." "How are things at home?" he asked. "I'm doing much better now that I asked my husband to leave," I said. I knew something was wrong by my doctor's posture, the way he worked to seem smaller than his 6'7" frame, but I couldn't get my mouth to form the words to ask. I leaned in toward him, kept eye contact, and lingered in this final moment of reprieve. "We found some irregular cells on your cervix, but they're not anything we've seen before," he said.

*

The words *possible cancer* written on the front of my chart.

*

By the time I was sixteen years old, my family was already talking about my children. I knew that I would want them one day, but I also knew I was too young to worry about it. I consoled myself with this to cover the stigmatization of being a Hispanic American woman and a mother.

In the end, it took me eight years after having Marleigh to garner the courage to have my son Cameron, because I worried what people would think of me, the breeding machine.

*

Marleigh approached me recently about a problem she was having with a boy in school who was bullying her. I told her the reason he's messing with her is because deep down he really likes her. I ignored what I've lived for repeating what I've heard all my life.

*

I teach my children values I don't believe in.

*

At each delivery they'd ask for my birthing plan when I never took the time to make one. The hospital staff would smile and tell me I was doing great. They'd ask if I wanted to watch my children breech with the use of mirrors. Each time my answer was a resounding no.

*

I remember the first time I felt around in the dark for you and you weren't there. I'd had a nightmare and realized it was you.

*

From the time I was full of angst, a defiant teenager, I knew I wanted to donate my organs and save someone even while I was dying. My only condition was that my eyes be left in my body so no one ever had to witness what I had.

*

I called my mom during my cancer testing. I sat in a Sonic parking lot and mustered up the courage to finally press the number programmed to speed dial her. My mom was upset that I hadn't told her sooner, but she's sensitive, and I went back and forth on waiting to tell her until I

knew for sure. If I received a clean bill of health, I would have stressed her for no reason, but I needed her to understand the situation and why I was making certain decisions for the future. “I’m getting married,” I blurted. I was so afraid to tell her, to disappoint her again, because I had already done it so much throughout my life. She scoffed at my outburst and told me I didn’t know what I was doing. I tried to explain myself. “Mom,” I started, “I want to try and have another baby before they have to remove my cervix.” Cervical cancer is a slow progressing cancer, the replicating cells destroying the organ in a lumbering manner. My team of physicians agreed to let it go untreated while I had another baby if the test results came back positive. I called Granger, my best friend at the time, to ask him if he would have a baby with me. “Of course I want to have a baby with you,” he said, “but I want to do it the right way and get married.”

*

Last October, Marleigh’s boxer Loki passed away after eleven years together. She had lost thirty pounds in six months, the dog’s ribs standing starkly through her brown fur. She began to have seizures, her body locking up as her eyes shifted rapidly when her brain began to depreciate from the pressure of the tumor. I took her to the veterinarian, but she was too old to treat a serious ailment so the veterinarian gave me his best guess. “With her symptoms, it’s most likely a brain tumor,” he said. I went home and called my parents, asked them to help soothe Marleigh in the days after we made the decision to put Loki to sleep. My daughter was devastated to lose her lifelong companion, the dog that cuddled her in bed while I left for work in the middle of the night.

*

The moment one of your children is grieving and you have no idea how to console them because you are already grieving what you once were.

*

I once witnessed my father drag my mother from the bank she worked in all the way to our house down the street. He had one hand fisted tightly in her hair as her skin tore on the concrete of the inner city street, but he kept on going. I sat pressed to the window, but I didn't try to help her. Her eyes bulged as she begged him to stop, but he never heard her.

*

I am a fatherless daughter.

*

When I was pregnant with Marleigh, the doctors gave me the option to abort her at thirty-two weeks due to abnormalities in her growth. No one could explain what was wrong. Her long bones were being calculated at two percent of a normal child's, they said she would be a dwarf, but there was no history of it in my family or her father's. She was killing me from the inside. I had lost thirty-five pounds due to a diagnosis of hyperemesis gravidarum that kept me in and out of the hospital. I was weak, I needed relief. Begged for it and felt selfish afterward. In that moment, when they all sat staring at me in pressed, white coats, with ambiguous expressions on their faces, I remember being at peace with my own death if only she would live. I just wanted it to end.

*

My eyesight is failing.

*

Before I ended that call with my mother, before the results of the biopsy came back as *irregular cervical cells, non-malignant*, before I knew the struggle with my cervix would follow me as I aged, I knew that what I needed in my life was a stable relationship and that stability was Granger, the person who knew and accepted me more than I accepted myself at times, the person who would never raise his voice to a woman with my past. I told my mom I was sorry I upset her, but she needed me to know she just didn't understand. "Why don't you wait for love?" she asked me. "I do love him and he loves me," I said, "It's time I saved me from myself."

Chapter 8: Trauma

Tonight is one of those nights when I'm on call for emergencies at the hospital but my guard is withdrawn into exhaustion and I'm sleeping so soundly my mind doesn't register the several chimes singing through the air in my quiet bedroom. I answer in a dream state, using tactile memory to push the green phone symbol and lift it to my ear. My gravel-thick voice penetrates the silence as I recite my customary, "This is Jessica."

The neurosurgeon on the other end of the line is winded as if he's been running. He explains the situation of our trauma patient headed by ambulance to our operating room. I listen, ask a few questions about treatment options, and tell him I'll be there as soon as I can. My heart is pounding from the surge of adrenaline that accompanies the patient report as I sit up in bed. I look down to check the time on the glowing screen of my phone; it's 2:56 am.

It's still dark in the room, that time in-between deepest night and a hopeful sunrise. My husband's off for the night and when he doesn't initially stir at the sound of my cell phone's early morning chime I assume he slept through the call. I slowly pull the covers off and inch toward the edge of the bed when he reaches out a hand to stop me. I know then that he's heard both ends of the conversation. He asks if it's one of his, a police officer from his department that was shot in the head during a standoff, but I don't know the answer to his question. When I receive patient reports in dire situations the patients are listed as traumas with no personal identifiers.

I can hear the emotion crackle through the question, that link between civil servants, the emotion we feel for each other. I tell him to try and get some rest as I hurry to leave the house but sleep never claims him again, and I think in some way, he knows I will need him to talk me

through it, trying to save a police officer that could've been him, that could be any day in our future.

A large group of officers, huddled outside the operating room together, turn to watch me as I arrive. Many of them are stone-faced. Some have stones crumbling as concern wins in etched lines across their faces. I have to clear my throat several times before I can introduce myself to them, let them know I will be working on their brother-in-arms in the next room who is fighting for his life.

I introduce myself as a “blue wife”, the wife of Deputy Sherwin Granger. It's important for me to announce who I am. For them to understand that saving him means as much to me as it does to them. I need them to know that I'm one them, but I'm also here because I've been specializing in arterial injuries for ten years and they could trust me.

The police chief steps forward and shakes my hand as she says she's surprised to meet me in such a place but you can see in her expression she approves of me as I enter the room and tell them over my shoulder, “If he's half as stubborn as my husband is, I can guarantee he isn't going to give up without a fight.”

It's true, I think to myself hours into the endovascular repair. The bullet went through the eye socket, through the carotid artery, and imbedded itself in the back of the skull. It was a freak accident, the bullet being a rogue shot.

We entered through a hole in his femoral artery at the groin, and using a series of catheters and wires, made our way into the injured carotid artery.

The artery was actively bleeding, the bullet having cut through it on impact, the walls of the artery failing to repair the hole, pushed passed its capacity to heal itself. Our choices were limited; he could bleed out before they could open the skull and repair it surgically. A decision

was made to sacrifice the carotid artery, embolize it by using a number of platinum coils. He will have a stroke from the interventional procedure, but potentially saving him is worth the risk.

It takes us longer than expected to get the bleeding to stop and the brain is starting to swell so he is transferred to a different operating room to relieve that pressure by removing the bone of the skull. My part of the treatment plan is complete. I follow him through the halls as if a string is pulling me behind him. I don't want to let go. I'm afraid I didn't do enough to save him. I feel as if I let my husband down.

As I walk, I pass rows of police officers leaning against the bland beige walls of the hospital hallways to hold themselves up when exhaustion would be more than willing to take them. I understand perfectly. I'm tired too, the sand collecting in the corners of my eyes as the hours mount a surge in the battle for life. Several officers offer to grab me coffee. They thank me as I walk by. I feel ashamed of their graciousness.

I stay well into the next day, bound to him as if my sheer presence could save him, until the fight is officially over and the chaplain recites Last Rites. I wait in blood stained scrubs and a sweat soaked hat, watching from the large hospital window in the walkway outside of the operating rooms as the flag covered stretcher is taken from the hospital to begin preparations for the officer's final resting place, a picture of my husband and I in New Zealand backlit on my cell phone's screen as I clutch it tightly in my hand and roll my eyes toward Heaven on a sigh.

Chapter 9: A Solo Flight

I remember feeling special with little gold wings pinned to my t-shirt by the pilot as I entered the cockpit to meet him before being shown to my seat by my personal flight attendant. I lifted my then non-existent chest high as I walked past everyone else already seated so the dim overhead lights of the walkway would make the wings shine. I craved the attention from strangers because it fueled my excitement for the trip to come. “Look at me,” I wanted to say, “I am going to be strong as I travel alone.”

My flight attendant handed me a little tub of vanilla ice cream as the plane was taxing, ruffling my hair in a motherly way as she asked if I was okay and went about her safety checks. I shook my head and smiled back as I shoved the ice cream into my mouth. The loud whirring of the engine made speaking difficult. It was the first time I’d ever been on a plane. My family did not have the money to travel for leisure. My mother sent me to Portugal for the summer because my grandmother, my normal caretaker, was spending six months in our hometown of Chaves.

She did that often, went home for half of the year to regain the feeling she had lost, the feeling of home. My mother was trying to raise me on her own and worked as many hours so I was flying to Lisbon alone. My mom assured me my grandmother would be waiting for me at the airport when I arrived the next morning.

I don’t know that I really cared what would happen next as long as I could get away from my great-grandmother Aurea. She moved into our house because she could no longer take care of herself and it was starting to fall on me to care for her with my grandmother’s absence and my mother’s occupation.

My clearest memory of Aurea is the time she bought my brother nice shoes. She came into the house and presented them directly to him. My mother intercepted the shoes and said in Portuguese, “if you do not have gifts for both of them, you cannot give them at all.”

My great-grandmother hunched in close to me as I played on the floor. She stared at me as if I were an experiment. She sneered in my face as she responded to my mother.

“Your son is pure bred. He is Portuguese.”

She is a *Cubana de merda*.

My grandmother jumped to my rescue, scooping me up off the floor and cradling me in her arms as I cried and asked if the mean lady was leaving. She yelled at her own mother in my defense, sent her out of the house for what she said, and slammed the door with a resounding thud. She apologized to me, cooed my favorite story about a rat named João Ratão who fell into a pot of boiling soup, until I began to calm. My breaths eventually slowing to even draws against the silk of her blouse.

It was confusing for me to see Aurea because of how similar she looked to my grandmother, Armandina. They had the same color hair, same eyes, even wore similar glasses. The difference was in the intonation of their voices as they spoke directly to me. Armandina always knew what pressure to use and when. Aurea always spoke in the same contentious resonance.

Aurea hated me for who I was. She still did.

I was nervous as the plane began to build up speed on the long runway, the dashes flashing violently in the window as the plane broke contact with the ground and catapulted into the sky. My stomach felt as if it was falling out, the sensation of nervousness collecting in my abdomen as I clutched the metal arms of my seat until my small fingers turned white from the

pressure. The plane was shaking as it listed first one way and then the other as it righted itself on its flight path to Europe. I remember praying for the shaking to stop, but I also prayed for a safe journey, one that would carry me safely into her arms.

I listened intently to the welcoming messages overhead as instructions for the flight were recited in English and then in Portuguese. I repeated the words in both languages, trying to train myself to flip back and forth with an ease I'd struggled to maintain growing up. We spoke Portuguese at home, so I only got to practice my English at school and now, in this safety briefing. *Please buckle your seatbelt*, I repeated, *por favor feche o cinto de segurança*. My flight attendant heard me practicing and gave me a thumb's up as she walked past.

When the plane leveled off, and New York City was safely intact below the fluffy white clouds, I closed my eyes and imagined reaching her. The confining walls of the plane melted away and the white noise of the engines lulled me into a light sleep. I pictured her waiting at the gate in a navy polka dot dress and black slip-on flats.

Her beige stockings will have a run up one leg that disappeared beneath her skirt, the white slip she always insists on wearing showing as her legs moved. Her hair will be coifed in a salt and pepper afro only a tiny, elderly woman like her could pull off. She'll push her large rose colored glasses up her nose to ensure she'll see clearly through the glass of the terminal when my plane lands and taxis into its assigned space. She'll smile broadly at me when I begin to run in her direction as I spot her seated in a chair.

I'd step into the doorway from the long journey up the jet bridge, the gray tunnel seeming longer with every step I took, and would finally see her exactly as I'd envisioned her and our reunion. I'd lean into the silk of that dress as she hugged me. Inhale deeply the perfume she always wore. Safe in knowing explicitly who she is, her enduring personality the only constant in

my childhood. My grandmother was my buoy until her death in December, 2009, where her legacy will be alive and well in my twenty-five-year old body, the memory of that moment; of stepping free of my first independent expedition and seeing her precisely as I saw myself, my conceived notion of waking up every day and striving to be just like her.

I learned so much about myself in those few hours. I was struggling with identity and reconciling it with my American heritage. It was such a subtle shift, the realization of who I was and what I wanted for the future. I was like the stamp in my passport, smeared from a touch before the ink was fully dried, but permanent and influential in the way my grandmother showed me what life could be that summer in Portugal, a rich culture I never quite fit into but adored because she was part of it.

Chapter 10: The Accident

I was riding home with my friend Brittany from a military training weekend with the National Guard. There was a light snow falling as we drove down the highway. Brittany maneuvered the Pontiac around a curve as we listened to music and gossiped about the other soldiers. There must have been a slick spot on the highway as she lost control of the car and we slid sideways to the barrier along the edge of the highway. The car slowed enough that the accident was just a slight tap against the metal barrier, my passenger side door pinging against it in a small high-pitched sound.

We looked at each other and laughed, the nervousness leaving us on a few *I'm so glad we're safe* giggles. I called my husband as she called her father to let them know what happened. She tried to start the car, but every turn on the key got quieter. The car wouldn't start.

"Pop the trunk," I told her, "you probably knocked the fuel pump reset switch loose when we hit the guardrail."

She nodded as she moved to hit the mechanism, but was never able to finish the motion. A teenager lost control of his car in the same spot we did and panicked. He took his foot off the accelerator, but did not attempt to hit the brake as he spun twice and collided with the back of Brittany's Pontiac.

The impact crumpled the trunk and back seats of the car. It sent my face crashing into the glass of the passenger side window as I spoke on the phone.

When I opened my eyes, I was confused. I had no idea what happened. Brittany was screaming in fear, and I remember telling her to stop screaming, not realizing she was concerned for me. I looked directly at her and asked her to find my phone so I could call my husband and

let him know I was okay, but when I looked down to search for the phone, there was blood flowing freely from my face and onto my grey Army uniform.

I lifted a hand and swiped under my nose, it came away red. The adrenaline coursing through my body held off the pain. I ran my fingers along the skin of my face, trying to find the injury. My nose was swollen, the bones near my nose and cheeks making crunching sounds as I shifted them around in my prodding.

Brittany picked up her phone and called an ambulance as I investigated through touch.

I looked in the rearview mirror, but it was too dark to see my face clearly. As I started to turn back, I noticed the airbags on the car behind us had deployed. I got out and went around, checking on the driver. His face was scraped and he was bleeding from minor cuts, but he seemed uninjured, if a little dazed. I asked him questions.

“Does your neck hurt?”

“Can you use your arms and legs?”

“Shake your head if it hurts where I’m touching,” I said as I began exploring his body for injuries I couldn’t readily see.

The teen just shook his head with every question.

“You’re face,” he pointed finally, “it looks really bad.”

“I’ve always been this ugly,” I joked as the ambulance arrived to carry me to the nearest hospital with my friend Brittany clutching my hand as I sat on the stretcher, guilt riddling the fine features of her face.

A lady waiting to be seen in the emergency department asked if I had been injured in Iraq.

“No ma’am, I had a car accident with my friend,” I replied.

They escorted me to the CT scanner and laid me down, the blood stained uniform sticking to my skin as I went in and out of the machine. The doctor came in just a few minutes later.

“I heard you work here,” he said.

I shook my head, “I do.”

“And you’re in the military when you’re not at the hospital?” he asked.

“That’s about right,” I said.

He smirked and gave me a diagnosis, “Well, superhero,” he started, “it looks like you have a crushed nose and several fragmented breaks on either side of the nose.”

He told me to expect to wake up with two black eyes and a very sore body. He gave me strong pain medication and a referral for a plastic surgeon within our hospital system, told me I needed to see him as soon as possible so the fragments didn’t set and permanently deform my face.

I thanked him and got up, went to the small mirror in the bathroom of my room and looked at myself for the first time that night. I had a large bump forming on one side of my nose, my cheeks were puffy and I had blood crusted to my upper lip and chin. The purple shadow of collecting blood was already showing underneath each eye. I had a blood stain on the rank at chest level on my uniform and got suddenly upset because I’d have to buy a new one, but I just needed an outlet for the anger I felt toward the teenage boy in the other room of the emergency department whose face was as perfect as it was this morning.

Chapter 11: Deep Down

Change can never come from silence, even at a depth of 100 feet.

I find myself swaying to the rhythm of the waves in the East Australian Current, riding in a blue and gray zodiac boat that seems fragile beneath the weight of a steel cage that provides shade from the early morning sun. The little boat is trolling in the open sea toward a shipwreck named *Yongala*. My husband and I are in the middle of receiving a dive report as we don our scuba gear. The status of the sea is severe today. The zodiac hooks to the stationary buoy on the surface by a pale weathered rope that seems taut but moveable in the fast-paced current as we arrive. It is easy to become mesmerized by the motion of it, the possibility of the rope breaking free and being dragged away in the force of the water.

My husband and I do a buddy check and jump from the back end of the boat toward the line when the boat captain throws up a hand and signals an all clear. Once all of the scuba divers are situated on the line, I begin pulling myself down on the rope hand-over-hand deeper into the water to get below the brisk current. *Yongala* sits very deep; on the sand bed in a solitary position that mimics perfectly the graveyard it has been since sinking during a cyclone in 1911 with every passenger still on board. The boat is impenetrable to us in respect of the dead, but we are granted a visit to explore the teeming sea life that lives within this place, this ship that once took the lives of 122 people, that sat alone and undiscovered for 50 years after disappearing.

I am in the lead, my husband following closely behind expelling bubbles through his regulator as he breathes in relaxed, even breaths. The first few feet are the worst, with jellyfish stinging my face near the exposed skin of my mouth like agonizing kisses. I stop and take one hand off the line trying to swat the jellies away, but they swish back over and grasp my skin in an unrelenting pulse of pain. I turn my head and point to my face so my husband can see the

stings, but he just looks back at me in a questioning way that makes his eyebrows squeeze in his mask. He can't see them. I stop again and close my eyes to ward off the panic, to regain my confidence amongst the pain. His hand slides over mine on the rope as he reaches around, half embracing me as he asks with a gloved hand if everything is okay. I can feel his heat even through the motion of the water that's whipping us back and forth and it settles me. I turn my head again and shake it up and down, but we can't communicate with words as we bob underwater. He pulls himself closer and lifts those sure fingers again, lightly tracing a stinging line on my face. Now I know for sure he can see the stings, he can see me. I continue forward, but he's staying much closer this time, in cadence with me on the tugs of the rope that remind me of our military training days together. We signal to each other as we dive deeper together. We reach the end of the line at the back of the boat, but we're now submerged well into the depth of the ocean. I lift my arm and check the dive computer, it reads 95 feet.

Dalton's law tells us that as the pressure from the water increases on a diver's body, so to does the pressure of the gases being inhaled from the tanks of 21% oxygen, 78% nitrogen, and 1% other gases divers carry on their backs. This law translates into more gas, oxygen and nitrogen, entering the blood stream and being absorbed into a diver's tissue as described by William Henry in 1803. The deeper a diver, the more nitrogen soaks the internal workings of the body like a sponge.

My husband and I let go of the line and reach neutral buoyancy before we start making our circular swim around the wreck. I release my inflator hose after I put just a touch of air in the BCD, buoyancy control device, and look over at him. I signal with an okay sign, a circle created by index finger and thumb with the last three fingers straight up and separated just a touch, and he sends one back. We're ready to explore the ship. I lean forward into a swimming position and

signal to the divemaster supervising our dive and flutter my fingers in a swimming motion that lets her know we are headed out on the starboard side of the wreck and will meet her back at the line when we begin to make our final ascent to the surface in about thirty minutes.

I feel nothing but emotion. I am weightless. I'm suspended in the water, propelling myself forward with a subtle kick from the long fins on both feet every few seconds. My body is working very hard and equally not at all. At this depth, I'll have to make my way around fairly quickly if I don't want to risk the chance of decompression illness, an all-encompassing term for injuries caused by air that can arise within the body when it goes from normal air pressure to an increased outlying pressure.

The nitrogen is compressing within me, bunching together and soaking my body tissues. The gas cannot be expelled through pores in my skin at depth. It is restrained by the pressure, held hostage in a body built to accept high levels of it. Bubbles start to form when saturation hits a maximum threshold. Bubbles are flowing through my blood looking for release, but release is not available until the pressure on the body begins to lessen, when I allow it to escape on ascent from deep within the ocean. The pressure mounts now, my watch beeps in warning. The bubbles begin to flow faster as they fight for freedom from the confinement of my skin. I can't see or feel them, but they always remind me of champagne and some of the most recent weddings I've attended, my own included.

I lifted the glass of champagne to toast my friend and her new husband. We arrived right before the flutes were filled and lifted. Becky, the bride, led us to the table where my coworkers were already seated. One was in a beautiful floral dress with her sunny yellow curls flowing around her shoulders, the other in a designer shirt to fit his designer attitude, his boyfriend just as stylish to his right at the table.

Becky and her husband gave speeches that made my fingertips itch to touch my husband as the sun set on a beautiful fall afternoon in rural Ohio. Sent that itch racing up my arms like air expelling itself toward the surface, the path of least resistance. I leaned into my husband, caught his faint cologne in the stagnant air of the tent and inhaled deeply. I let it sit in my lungs until my body begged for oxygen, and then repeated the motion until I was breathless in my folding chair. Pushed my lungs to their limit over and again in an effort to memorize his smell.

Then the speeches were over and music sounded from hidden speakers around the room in a single crash that rocked the tent after dessert had been served and the flutes drained of the bubbly. People began to shimmy onto the dance floor. Already a little tipsy, they were gyrating in their tight wedding dresses and suits, throwing their arms around each other and their heads back to laugh, hard-soled shoes making tapping noises on the temporary wooden floor in time to the music.

My husband stood and grinned down at me until I rolled my eyes and stood with him. I knew what he wanted as he begged in his Caribbean-accented lilt to dance. I had to take my shoes off before we hit the dance floor because there would've been no getting him off of it once he got started and I barely had time to hear them hit before he tugged me out to the floor by one hand as he loosened his tie with the other.

He bounced over to Becky while he handed me off to Todd, the groom, and we danced until breath sawed in and out of my lungs. Todd grabbed my hand and spun me in a country twirl that made me dizzy. We were the only ones left standing, Todd, my husband, Becky, and me. The guests I had just seen dancing the night away were gone. The feeling of isolation was enough to give me vertigo, but I told myself it was the twirl. I smiled at Todd as I leaned forward, hands on my knees, and told him his dancing skills had me dazed. My gaze shifted to

my husband who had stopped dancing with the bride. He came over and put both hands on my shoulders to steady me. His eyes scanned my face, searched for a problem. I pointed to my chest, showed him my harsh inhalations as I tried to recover from the spinning motion. He shook his head as if encouraging me to shake it off, understood what I needed by the subtle cues of my body language as he gave me the crook of his right arm and escorted me past the gazes of those seated inside the tent.

We stood quietly outside and listened to the muffled sounds of the wedding. He came up behind me and rubbed his hands, so unlike my own, along my arms to combat the goose bumps littering my skin in the stifling heat.

“Do you remember ours?” he asked.

“Of course, I do!” I laughed.

It was July 16, 2013. I was in a white tea length dress and turquoise pumps. He was in a white suit and turquoise bowtie as we rode up in the elevator of City Hall together. We entered the office hand-in-hand to pick up the marriage license. The administrator looked up as the bell on the door jingled. He asked for our driver’s licenses and handed us a few final forms to fill out while he retrieved our license. *Name, birthdate, occupation, pleasantries*. For him I wrote “cop”, for me, “radiology.” He returned with our completed online application. I handed him the ancillary form and he looked everything over.

“Have either of you been married before?” he’d asked.

“Yes, I have,” I told him as I slipped my finalized divorce documents out of the folder.

“How about you?” He directed this question at Granger, my husband.

“No,” he responded.

“It says here you weren’t born in the United States, do you have your birth certificate and proof of citizenship?”

My husband fished out his birth certificate issued by the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and his citizenship papers.

“Are you sure you’ve never been married before, not even in another country?” He’d asked.

With a resounding no from my husband and permission to marry in our hands, we went to the courtroom as quickly as possible and said *I do*, but the vows were really exchanged in our home in front of our closest relatives. My husband had spoken in a clear voice as he addressed the crowd celebrating our love. He poured me a glass of champagne and handed it to me with the promise to heal me with his love, make up for the years I’d spent in an abusive marriage before him, *be my spine and mind when needed but never the heart*, he had said, because he fully believed I had it all on my own, a willingness to love him even after all of the loss I’d suffered. I didn’t address anyone during the toast, not even him. I stood silently at his side and lifted the glass when he was done, but there was nothing I could say in that moment that would be enough to make him stay forever. I wanted to tell him now, vow everything I wanted to but didn’t then.

Instead, I said, “Let’s head back inside.”

The seats were mostly empty when we entered, many of the wedding guests back on the dance floor. I could feel their happiness in the vibrations of their bodies as they wobbled together in rhythm. I went back to our table and picked up my glass of red wine. Granger caught up to me and pulled my chair out, ushered me forward toward the table slowly.

“Let’s sit this one out,” he said as he sat down himself.

We twitched in our seats, struggling to sit still as our bodies remembered the feel of each other's in motion on the dance floor. We shifted closer together again as we spoke about everything and anything, Granger refilling my wine glass as we watched everyone enjoy themselves. Becky caught my eye and came over to grab me.

“What are you guys doing sitting down,” she shouted, “get up and dance darlin’!”

She grabbed my hand and tugged me back toward the dance floor. We danced together for a while, the guys piling up on both sides as we shook our hips in time to some country song I still can't name. I looked at my husband and waved him over, pled with him to come join me. He agreed with a subtle head nod as if hesitating, but he came straight for me anyway. When he reached to grab my hands, the large princess cut diamond on my left hand scraped his palm a little. He grimaced from the sting and pulled me to his chest to complain about how sharp the thing was. I looked up at him exasperated.

“You bought it!” I started to say, but his smile suddenly didn't reach his eyes. “What's wrong?” I asked him.

“I didn't want to ruin your good time.” And I knew he was talking about the male attention I was getting by dancing with Becky.

“You are my good time,” I said.

We looked ridiculous slow dancing to a song's fast rhythm as the music changed, but it felt perfect, middle school dance perfect. He brought his head around and gave me a lingering kiss that dropped my defenses until he dipped me so severely my head snapped back and I lost my balance. He caught me before I fell, but we teetered on the edge of making fools of ourselves for a few seconds. I burst into laughter as he slid his strong arm up my spine and straightened me

into a stand. I looked around to see how many people saw our embarrassing moment, but there was no one there. We were the only two on the dance floor.

We alternated our solitary dances with more rest at the table. We formed a pattern with the other wedding guests, them in motion as we watched, them turning their heads away when we stepped onto the makeshift wooden floor together. We were on dangerous ground as we struggled with this large group of people more than we ever had on a deep, difficult dive. The complication of absorbed nitrogen less alarming to our livelihood than the thoughts of these wedding guests when they truly saw us for what we were.

Toward the end of the night, a friend of Becky's named Mark came over to sit at our table and apologize. My husband shook his hand in greeting, but told him there was no reason to apologize.

"I'm so sorry for the way you two are being treated. It's not right and you don't deserve it," he said.

"Mark," I started, "believe it or not, we're used to this, but thank you anyway."

Mark sat firmly in the seat and kept repeating what we already knew was true of the world, droning in the background as I considered what he had said initially. We live in Ohio and what happened tonight has happened many times before this. What, at first, didn't register as wrong now felt sinful to me and yet I wouldn't change what I had for this distressing feeling they left in my lungs tonight as my breath stuttered that first time I realized they had all left us to stand alone on the dance floor.

"The sad part is," Mark ended his speech, "you are probably a decent, educated man, and it's clear you love your wife very much, they are just jealous of the things they don't understand." That one word lingered...to *understand*.

We said goodbye to Becky and Todd and started the long drive back home late in the evening. It was dark and the lack of streetlights in the small town seemed to swallow up even the glare of our headlights as we stared out of the front windshield and the car passed town square, a large Confederate flag above City Hall waving in the warm breeze. We mostly sat in silence as he steered us towards home. I reached for his hand, held it, admired the contrast between us, his dark strong fingers lacing perfectly with my white smaller ones, the pink of my nail beds very similar to his, the blue veins visible in mine once supplying blood to our only child together, a son. When words failed me multiple times all I really wanted was to get home, to reach a door we could lock with finality, and end the suffocation of the outside world.

“Please, don’t get lost,” I finally said to him.

“I won’t,” he replied as he lifted our interlocked palms and kissed my fingers.

He is plucking those same fingers now trying to get my attention as I linger in the memory. He asks me with a hand signal if my ear is bothering me, wagging his open hand back and forth with the palm down, and I shake my head no, point to my brain so he understands I was lost in a thought, but I’m back now. I point to both of my eyes and then out to the water around the ship asking if he can see anything coming. I begged for this dive after researching it when we started to make plans for our visit to the east coast of Australia for his 40th birthday. I am hoping to see the large, elusive guitar shark that visits *Yongala* a few times per week. I am losing hope now though, our time is running out, my computer flashing one minute to NDC, no decompression diving. I point to my computer and signal with a thumb’s up toward the surface that I need to start ascending.

I take the lead again; get into our practiced formation as we begin to climb up over the top of the ship on the port side. The current is pushing against me at this more shallow depth,

pulling the black hose of my regulator and almost dislodging the mouthpiece. The top of the boat is absolutely alive with schools of fish, giant Queensland grouper, a huge green sea turtle diving into the ship in search of food, vibrant corals clinging to the metal of the bow as they gather nutrients, and us fighting our way back wide-eyed and wondersome. It's breathtaking, beautiful, and busy like a highway during rush hour in downtown Los Angeles. I want to look everywhere and nowhere, the disappointment of the shark overshadowing the fascinating view for just a moment.

It feels as if we are alone. Everyone else is on the line at the stern and pulling themselves toward the dive boat at the surface. There were no other dives at the end of the rope at the beginning of the dive. I could see them above us, their legs disappearing over the top of the wreck as they hung tightly tethered. If I'm honest, I don't believe anyone else made it off the line, the fear in feeling the rip of the current freezing them in place.

I point to the divers and lift a shoulder in question. Granger looks over at me and shrugs in a way that says, *maybe next time*, both for those who didn't explore the wreck and for our misfortune with the shark. I gather the strength to end the dive, take in a deep breath of longing and close my eyes in defeat. I open them a second later resolutely.

My husband is in front of me and laughing so hard the motion is forcing air to free-flow from his regulator, the *shhhhh* sound of the bubbles like a child's laughter. The sound is all around me, vibrating my ear drums, the scar on his cheek sinking beneath the black silicone of his masks as his smile widens. I wave an arm in front of my face to clear the bubbles away and squint at him in question. He grabs me by the jacket and quickly swims me over to the port side of the boat practically dumping me over the side. I scan the blue, searching, and like an enigma coming to fruition I see it, the guitar shark. Swimming slowly and with an ease I can only dream

of, the ten-foot guitar shark ambles by right below us, its triangular spotted head leading the regal whipping tail as it gives us a show.

I sink back down like a stone, expelling the air from my lungs in a rush to greet it. My husband is right beside me with a dive camera in hand, ready to record the moment, to make it everlasting for us. I stare at the shark for as long as I can, my eyes burning from the effort to stay open with the salty residue inside of my mask making it a challenge, and then it's over and the guitar shark has disappeared into the cerulean abyss of the ocean's water again.

I am overcome with happiness and start to dance a jig in a slow circle, my two index fingers pointed straight up as I jounce my arms up and down and I spin. I imagine the bioluminescent algae glowing in agitation but remaining unseen in the daylight as I disrupt their home. I call the dive with a giant smile that pulls my pink lips away from the blue of my mouthpiece, those few minutes at depth with the shark costing me several minutes of the dive. I straighten my torso toward the surface and slowly ascend, take a deep breath that causes my lungs to expand and lift me until I level out on top of the ship again.

I struggle to reach the rope connected to the zodiac as the current tries to contain me, capture me, and keep me within it. I'm breathing heavier now, consuming more air than I was in the deep water of the starboard side, but I feel light and contented even as I battle the flow of water. My husband is assisting me in a subtle way, bumping against my back as he uses the strength in his legs to push us forward. I grab the rope a second before my husband does and sag in relief. My legs relax underneath me as my knuckles turn white in an effort to hold my body steady. Granger grabs my attention by making a forward and backward motion in front of his chest that signifies he's winded. I signal, *me too*.

We work our way back up the same way we made it down, hand-over-hand, inch-by-inch until we reach about 15 feet. My computer beeps rapidly to signal I need a safety stop at this level because the pressure is said to be close to ambient air pressure, that three minutes are required at this shallow depth to allow those residual nitrogen bubbles to dissolve back into the inert gas it once was. The absorbed nitrogen sitting in aggravated tissue starts to calm and release, each exhalation taking a little more of the burden on our bodies away. My husband brings the camera around and replays the video of the guitar shark on the 2-inch monitor on the back and we almost bump heads as we try to get a better view of the screen and closer to the moment.

I start to move toward the surface when the three minutes is over, exhaling the final breath of my dive in excitement, the bubbles racing me happily toward the sun as we both break the surface. The boat captain shouts over the side and I make a fist, bump it against the top of my head, a signal that means I'm not in distress, and yank myself the last few feet toward the ladder on the back of the boat. I remove my fins and heave myself up onto the platform with my equipment still on and drenched with water, weighing me down like a combat load of ammunition on patrol.

I drop my tank into a holder as I sit on the wooden bench along the edge of the boat and remove my gear. I wait for my husband to take his off and then I jump up and throw myself in his arm. We hug for long enough to spark everyone's curiosity about what we saw that has me so happy. Some of the passengers could guess why I am so happy, but only he truly knows the answer, and as the divemaster asks "How was your dive?" I'm not sure what to say. I pull slightly away from my husband and smile over at her. "It was everything I hoped it would be," I finally say as I switch my focus from her back to my husband and repeat the phrase.

The boat engine roars to life as the crew disconnects us from the mooring line and we sit back down for the 45-minute journey back to shore. I look over the side as the boat begins to move. The giant turtle from our dive surfaces, its nostrils motionless above the choppy water as its legs sway back and forth to hold it steady below. That one inhalation of air allowing it to dive with us without the risk of excess nitrogen, the bubbles affecting us in ways that can leave lasting damage while the turtle remains completely unaffected in the same circumstances, and as it dives back under, I return my focus to the people talking over the din of the rushing water and join the conversation.

Chapter 12: A Brain-Dead Body

This small segment of my story is for you, the no one, the nobody, the man, the brother, the father, I was unable to save today. You came in nameless, without a history, or a life.

If only I had the chance to speak to you before consciousness slipped away from us as the blood, unseen, flowed into your precious brain space. I could have introduced myself to you, told you my name. We could have bonded over language. You would have felt safer, maybe, in knowing I am Cuban. We could've written down your history before it got lost in a lack of translation as you fell unresponsive and began to die.

But I'll never get that chance.

To know your name, where you came from, why you were here in the United States struggling alongside me but invisible to the untrained eye. Afraid to identify yourself without papers to save you.

I worked as fast as I could to help you, help us, to save one more of our people, to defeat the odds against us. I threw a gown on and begged my hands to work faster, but I was unsuccessful, still too slow in human functionality against the hemorrhage.

Maybe you were feeling unwell this morning as you got ready for work, but you didn't say, probably didn't want to burden anyone with the headache that was plaguing you. You started your day with the thought of work on your mind, went to work as your body began to prepare itself, and slumped over suddenly from the tiny, silent explosion in your brain.

The CAT scan only showed a large amount of blood on the brain, the spectrum of grays appearing as uniform as a healthy person's except for the arrant white of the bleeding in the frontal lobe. Everyone took a turn following the bleedings around the circular edges, using a finger to trace the perimeter for a breach in the uniformity, to locate and trace the origins of the

bleed, but none source made itself known. Where could it be coming from, everyone asked? We thought we'd see an aneurysm and be able to repair it before it caused lasting damage, but it wasn't visible.

Why was this happening to someone in his late-40s? No one knew. Your skin was clear of blood, your coloring was good, the golden hue shining in the operating room lights as they rushed you in. The black hairs you didn't comb this morning were swaying in the breeze as your stretcher rounded the corner, but the second I approached and pushed your right eyelid up I knew we were in trouble. The deep brown of your iris was gone and in its place was a large black pupil, it swallowing the person you once were. Then the second pupil expanded in the left eye and we were running out of time. This was your brain's way of showing what you could not tell us in words.

I waited until they were able to relieve the pressure on your brain by surgically removing the bone, but the angiogram we performed of your arteries proved the swelling was too much to compete with and the images showed your body was no longer supplying life-giving blood to your brain. People started throwing around phrases like "possible brain-dead diagnosis" and "undocumented John Doe...isn't going to make it," and I knew our time was up before it even began, everyone packing up the surgical kits when the announcement was made, blankets were being dropped on the floor to soak up the blood you left behind.

It hurt me to walk away from you in that moment. To turn and forget about you.

I wondered what you were like before your mind failed, what kind of fate you had suffered, what your plans were for the future. You made me want to do something I hardly ever did anymore; you made me want to pray for you.

So I did.

I went to my office and shut the door. Sat with my head in my hands and prayed:

Padre nuestro,

que estás en el cielo.

Santificado sea tu nombre.

Venga tu reino.

Hágase tu voluntad en la tierra como en el cielo.

Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día.

Perdona nuestras ofensas,

como también nosotros perdonamos a los que nos ofenden.

No nos dejes caer en tentación y libranos del mal.

Amén.

I prayed that you'd find a blissful peace in death that you couldn't find in life. For Santa Muerte to come and carry you in her arms to the land of your ancestors. I prayed for someone to identify you, to lay you beneath the soil from which you were first born until your body dissolves into ash in the *matorral* before sending you back. You'll float back to me on a light breeze that caresses my face as the bus arrives in Ohio with next year's crop workers.

Chapter 13: Gears

I slide into the heavy black seat of my Fiat each morning. I latch my seat belt; stick the key in the ignition, step on the clutch, and wait for the spark to ignite the engine. It explodes in quick sounds then lulls into a purr as I take myself through the proper sequence of gears, one, two, three, four, five, six, practicing until my anxiety quiets.

I put the car in reverse.

I don't bother turning around because I have a backup camera that lets me know when I'm too close to hitting something, when I sway too far from the path and need to correct my steering. The truth is, I'm afraid to look back, to turn my head and see him there again, to realize that he's back and I'm alone, the paranoia that I'm being followed a caress to my psyche like the subtle pressure of my headrest against me. The backup camera shows only the pavement of my driveway lined by the most vibrant middle-American grass in spring with rows of lilies just starting to open in preparation for the sun that never fails to rise.

It's a short roll backward in neutral after that, a coast before I engage first gear with a light tap of my foot on the clutch. It takes just the right pressure and balance between the amount of gas I give, how high I rev the engine, and when the gear finally engages before I can be on my way, but then the turbo kicks in when I least expect it and I'm thrown back into the seat from the momentum.

The car is safely in first gear, but the torque sends my heart racing and I'm pushed back into a memory of the night he almost killed me.

We hired a babysitter for our daughter, went out to the club, and he drank while I watched the ice melt in my glass. He was speaking to some friends in a really loud voice. I knew he was already drunk. I pulled him to the side around midnight and quietly asked him to stop

drinking. He ignored my plea. He laughed and stumbled closer, the stifling heat of his body causing the hair of my arms to stand on end.

He leaned down in my ear and whispered, “I checked your Internet history today you stupid bitch.”

His birth mother had recently died of an accidental overdose and he was having trouble coping. I was sending out invitations for a surprise birthday party for him because I thought it would make him happy. He found the invites in my history as I responded to them.

“You think you’re so smart, don’t you?” He said, “I found out anyway, because that’s what I do. I know everything.”

I lifted a shoulder in response as if it didn’t bother me.

“I think we should still have the party,” I said sincerely as I put a hand on his arm in a show of support because emotions weren’t our strong suit, but he knocked it off as he headed back to the bar.

I tried to change tactics as I followed closely behind him.

Second gear feels forced as the engine struggles to keep the car at a controlled crawl and I can feel the pain overtake me like gunpowder residue that sits along my skin but can only be found by forensic analysis as my hand slips off the shift knob and I hesitate.

Our night out ended at last call when he could barely stand and I had to place a shoulder underneath his arm as we stumbled out to the car together. I drove us home and pulled another stumbling assist into the front foyer of our beautiful four-bedroom suburban home.

I was so tired of being angry, of the public humiliation, of the mental warfare. I was defeated. I told him what had been on my mind for some time about finally separating after years of talking about it but he didn’t agree.

He started screaming about the ways I've wronged him. He'd pick up a picture frame and force me to look at it, grab me by my hair until the glass was touching my nose. He said I'd lose everything if we divorced, threw those frames at the wall with such force it had begun raining glass, the frames leaving deep grooves like tears rolling down the drywall.

Sometimes, there's heavy traffic and I can't manage to make it out of third gear; constantly wiggling the knob back and forth as I ride the clutch, my thigh burning from the up and down on the pedal. The frustration of it making me want to scream as the automatic drivers have no concern for the amount of effort it takes for me to drive my manual car. The ache in my left knee from an old Army injury exacerbated by the constant flux of the rush hour commute causes my driving to get sloppy as I focus on the agony of that night from the tiny explosions in my head, the vessels in my eyes rupturing and bleeding into the stark white sclera of both eyes, the blossoming of the bruises along my neck that had begun to form even before he let go.

I tried to run when he teetered. He reached for me, made contact with my arm before I could escape by locking him out of our bedroom. He spun me by it and sent me crashing into the rail of our four-poster bed until I tumbled onto it.

He got on top of me as I laid flat on my back, his thighs split over mine and holding me down by the sheer weight difference between us. He slanted downward, the smell of the alcohol on his breath making me want to vomit.

I find myself switching into fourth gear without the use of the clutch, as if the timing of the spinning shaft is built into my mind; listen, wait, push the gear in just a touch until I feel it click, then seat it fully before I again step on the accelerator and glide more rapidly toward my destination.

I held my breath as long as I could in the onslaught and fought to turn my head away from the smell of his anger in the putrid finish of the whiskey he'd consumed. I willed my lungs to hold, promised myself a sequence of deep inhales if I could just get out from underneath the burden of his dense, clouded breathing. I slowly counted as the fire built in my chest, my heart running within my breast in an effort to supply oxygen to my brain: one, two, three, four, five, six, you can do it I recited, until he gently rested the gun beside me in warning and wrapped both hands around my throat and squeezed, cutting off circulation to the only part of me that was fighting to stay with him.

The pressure of his fingers dug into my spine. It felt as if he'd snap my neck with the force of rage in his palms as gravity shifted the substance of his body into a weapon. My eyes were burning as I stared up at him and the vessels began to rupture. The world turned red in the grey bedroom as I started to float. My breath was trapped in my neck, my lungs suspended in the shock of sudden restriction.

There was no fight in my body. It was as tired as I was. I wanted it to be over, to give him what he wanted. The pain was subduing as I lost feeling in my face and my scalp. The itch of the hair he had pulled dulling beneath the deprivation of oxygen.

My eyes began to close. I willed them open. I wanted him to see me. They closed anyway.

Sometimes I miss fifth gear and the car drops back to third, below what the engine is capable of, my head snapping back and forth like a slinky as the car attempts to slow me down enough to match what I've asked of it, but instead, I get frustrated and slam it into fifth gear, force it, try again until it holds.

He told me again what he always said in anger as I drifted out of consciousness:

1. “You do this on purpose.”
2. “You think you’re so perfect, but you’re wrong.”
3. You’re lucky I’m with you, because no one else would want to be.”
4. “You disgust me.”
5. “You’re worthless.”

Then, he suddenly let go and I could hear the safety on my SIG 9mm click off as he put a round in the chamber and put the gun to his own head. He had a plan. Someone was going to die if we couldn’t make it work.

Then the highway suddenly opens up as if the traffic is just a figment of my imagination. I know it’s real from the feel of sitting in it. The way I used to feel when I’d open my eyes in the morning and he’d still be there. If I’m able to reach sixth gear, the relative safety of a cruising speed impossible to match by a human, I relax my left leg, and loosen my grip on the knob of the gearshift. I roll down the window and feel the wind run through my hair like fingers, feel the freedom in the whistling air of the open road. I have a few seconds of clarity in the silence of my thoughts to mourn that day. I try to conjure up the exact sensation of it, but it always leaves me on the breeze being carried away from my open window routine that accompanies my daily commute.

A friend of ours was worried about his behavior at the bar and followed us home. He barged into the bedroom and managed to revive what was left of me once he figured out I was in real trouble. He shook me over and over again, but I could only feel the weightless nothing of myself in that moment. I could hear his voice calling me in the distance. I managed to open my eyes.

“Steve,” I asked, “is it really you?”

I rolled onto my side and grabbed for him to get myself upright. I hugged him as he made sure I was steady on my feet before leading me downstairs toward the front door.

“Thank you for coming,” I said, “he has my gun.”

My husband was at the dining room table with my gun to his temple, crying.

“I can’t live without you. If you leave me I’ll kill myself,” my husband said.

Hours later, he coaxed my husband to finally drop the gun and I took the first long, real breath of the night. I needed something to do. I bent down and leaned heavily on both knees as I began digging the glass shards of the broken picture frames and wood from the busted doorjamb out of the beige carpet. The door to our bedroom would have to be replaced, I remember thinking as I created a tiny pile of fractured pieces.

Our friend put both hands under my armpits and lifted me from the ground. He escorted me out of the house and into his car where we sat for hours in a Kroger grocery store parking lot in silence.

As the sun was beginning to peak on the horizon, he turned to me and said *you deserve better than this*. All I could do was smile in return. Not a full-blown smile that would’ve exposed all of my teeth, but a timid rising of one side of my pale mouth that let him know I was scared, but I’d be stronger tomorrow than I was that day.

Chapter 14: The Science of a Cell

I recently read a few articles that a mutation in genes has been found that can help solve the mystery of the origins of both light and dark skin. These studies are hypothesizing that light skin originated in the same places as dark skin. Skin gene variants can all be traced back to Africa.

*

My father sends his DNA in for testing. He purchases one of those online DNA tests that returns results in percentages. It also provides information on others you may be related to that have taken the same DNA test. His results are in: he has a high percentage of DNA with its origins in Africa. He asks if I've ever been curious enough to send mine in. I say, "No, I've always been comfortable being something other than white."

*

Melanosomes are organelles that hold and transport pigment.

*

The first time I almost end up in a holding cell is on entering Japan. The immigration officer's fingers tighten around my arm to pull me out of line. "Why are you visiting Japan," he shouts at us as he snatches the passports from my fingers. My husband tries to explain that we are visiting for a few days on a layover as we make our way back to the United States from a wedding in Thailand, but the officer cuts him off and speaks directly to me. I repeat the story. He enquires about our identical last names. "We're married; he's my husband," I motion with my arm toward my husband. He asks me twice more to identify him. I point as if we're contestants on *The Price is Right*. He hesitates before slowly returning the passports and announcing we are being questioned because we fit the description of an unknown man from the African continent who has been illegally importing drugs and Eastern European women; him, the possible African, me,

the white woman. We just stare clutching our American passports. The seconds seem to linger in the air like witnesses until the immigration officer finally lifts a hand to the agent stamping passports and signals to let us through.

*

Lineage specifications of cells carrying pigment are predisposed.

*

The second time I almost end up in a holding cell in on entering Iceland. We are on a family trip for my daughter's ninth birthday. I walk up to the counter with Granger and my daughter and we are allowed entry. We wait for my brothers on the other side of the glass immigration enclosure. A few minutes pass and we are still waiting. I think, for sure, my brothers should be through the barrier by now. I turn back and lean around the cubicles. The immigration officer is standing, walking out of the booth, and going to consult with another officer. I lift both arms, palms up, in question. My brother just shakes his head and shoos me forward. I cross my arms in front of my chest and lift an eyebrow, letting my brother know I am not walking away. The two officers come back and ask more questions. They hand my brother his passport and finally let him through. "What happened," I ask him. He tells me they were worried he had an affiliation with the Middle East. "Like, that you're a terrorist," I ask. I really look at my brother then. He has a long reddish beard that covers the bottom of his face, his light eyes and slender nose getting lost in the amount of hair he insists on growing out for his job. He is an electrical engineer who specializes in aircraft radar. When the United States sell planes to other countries, my brother travels to ensure the systems of those planes are working correctly. His job sends him to our allies in the Middle East for at least half of every year, his passport riddled with country stamps from Oman, Turkey, and Jordan. "What did you tell them to let you through," I ask. "I told them

I work for the U.S. government,” he says as he fits me under his arm and forces me to walk away from the booth.

*

The unique melanocytes of my outer most layer of skin are handicapped by an imperial disposition, but those of my hair and eyes demand to be seen in the darkness of my ancestors.

*

The third time I almost end up in a holding cell is in Angkor Thom, Cambodia. My husband and I arrive on a tuk-tuk late in the day. We are the only tourists entering Angkor Thom. The sun is starting to set as the chimes and smoke of Buddhist rituals are beginning. There are stairs leading into Angkor Thom. My husband asks if I want to go down and see what’s below, but I am enamored with the large stone faces of the surface. I lift my Canon and tell him I am going to stay topside. He nods and heads into the ancient site. I snap a shot, turn a corner, move forward a few paces, and repeat the snaps. I have the camera on rapid fire as I try to beat the sunset. A group of Cambodian men in their early-twenties approach from the entrance. I settle my face in the lens and get low to the ground, shoot up toward the sky. I stand. The men are surrounding me. “Are you American,” they ask me. “No,” I answer. They are unconvinced of my answer. They tell me I look and sound American, that I will bring a good price for them. “People pay more for white women,” one says. “I’m not alone,” I say loudly in response. I look around for my husband, but I don’t see him. I lift my camera and apologize to it. I plan to use it to smash my way out of this group of men. I tell myself, *after everything you’ve been through, this will not be your fate in life*. They step in closer. I start to spin in a circle in an attempt to see if one of them tries to grab for me. I spot a flash of movement in the periphery and start barreling toward it, lifting my camera high and slicing it in a downward arc over and over again. My husband

stomps toward the group at the same time with his arm up, running through the crowd of men in an attempt to reach me. A few go flying, the rest scramble to get away.

*

My skin turns a deep brown in the sun, the melanocytes in my skin responding by producing melanin to protect me.

*

The one and only time I see the inside of a cell is when I'm twelve-years-old. I wait for my mother to go to sleep before sneaking out to meet a twenty-year-old gangbanger I've been dating. A police car driving through the busy intersection pulls into the empty gas station I'm waiting outside of. The officer gets out and asks me if I know what time it is. I ignore him. He walks toward me and repeats the question. "It's way past curfew," he says. "I'm just waiting for a ride," I finally respond. There are a few open cans of beer at my feet. He leans down and picks one up. "Are these yours?" I tell him they aren't. This is true, I am only waiting for my boyfriend, I have no interest in getting drunk in the parking lot of a closed gas station. He doesn't believe me, says he knows my type. He handcuffs me and puts me in the back of his cruiser. He takes me down to his office and writes down the information I give him. "Does your mom know you're out," he asks. I tell him that she does. He doesn't believe me. He drives me home and turns the spotlight on his cruiser toward my mom's bedroom window. She pushes the thin white curtain back from her window and looks down, but I imagine the spotlight is blinding her. She comes down, exiting through the front door of the house, as she cinches the worn rose robe around her nightgown. She spots me in the back of the cruiser. The officer explains what has happened. My mom looks at me, disappointment driving her eyebrows together. We stare at each other for a while, but I don't offer up an explanation. The officer interrupts the eye contact by

placing his body between my mother and the door. He warns her to keep a closer eye on me. He says we'll have to go to court and explain why I broke curfew. I feel immediate remorse that my mom has to take off of work to justify my actions in front of a judge. My mom doesn't back down when the cop places himself between us. In fact, she straightens up as if she's ready to take him on just to get to me. She rigidly thanks the officer for bringing me home safe and flicks a hand toward the door, pressuring the cop to release me from the backseat. I slip out of the cruiser; walk past my mother, into the house without a word, and lock myself in my bedroom. "We'll talk about this in the morning," she says as she drifts past my door. I can hear the rasp of her delicate nails scraping the hall side of my door as she passes and I place my own hand on the inside, picture our hands connecting as she walks away.

Chapter 15: Hindrance

The sirens started to melt into one another as multiple fire trucks followed the first down the street beneath our flat. I opened my eyes. The smoke covered the moon. It was so dark in the room I was disoriented. I followed the flashing red lights to the windowpane.

Kristy, my new roommate for a study abroad internship in London, was already in the apartment when I arrived. I was working on my MFA in creative writing at the University of Texas El Paso. I knocked on our bedroom door and peeked around the jamb with a smile. Kristy and I had taken a few classes online together and I was excited to finally meet her in person.

“How was your flight?” Kristy asked me as she got up off her bed with a hand out.

“It was good,” I laughed and gave her my hand, “but I couldn’t sleep much.”

I took the overnight flight from New York City to London, England on June 12. It was mid-day on June 13th by the time I reached our flat in Notting Hill. I was looking forward to going to bed early that night, right after our welcome dinner to meet the undergraduate students we’d be teaching during the twenty-day study abroad program.

I unpacked after dinner while Kristy and I joked about how small the room we were sharing was. There was about a foot of space between her bed and mine. London was unusually hot and the flat didn’t have air conditioning. I kept telling her we sounded super-American bitching about the lack of AC, but the only thing available in the flat to cool us down was a tiny fan you’d find in an office cubicle.

Kristy placed it on my nightstand and pointed it at the two of us as the sun went down. We managed to wrestle open the old window together before bed in an effort to save us from our misery. I gave her a high-five as the window finally stayed in its position and tucked myself into the thin sheet on my twin-sized mattress.

The smoke reached out first, tumbling into our wide-open window before the alarms could rouse us. One fire truck went by and I stirred, looked at my cell to see it was 130 am, but fell back into exhaustion.

An apartment building was on fire up the street. I remember worrying because my program was split up between three different apartment buildings throughout the Notting Hill area. The building engulfed in flames was a high rise, much higher than any of our apartments. I called the program coordinator anyway. His apartment was much closer to the fire. He told me he was recording it on his phone. That people were trapped and screaming for someone to save them.

The sirens wailed well into the morning. I sat up and cried for the many people still inside the building. The fire was still not under control as forty fire trucks took up most of the city streets. My mother called me in a panic when the footage was posted to the news.

I told her I was safe.

Kristy and I walked down to Caffè Nero across from Ladbroke Grove tube station late that afternoon to meet the program for a show. The streets were busy. People were openly crying. There were already photos plastered by friends and family to the glass of the café of the occupants missing from Grenfell Tower in the aftermath of the blaze.

I stopped and stared at the photos. There was a young mother in a purple hijab squatting down at the park with her two small children, an elderly man with gray hair that seemed to float above his dark skin, and a teenage girl with my name and long, curly brown hair, all smiling in flashes of white teeth as they posed for pictures taken in happier times. Kristy was calling my name, shaking my arm and asking if I was okay, but I was gone, back in New York City and standing beside the same type of pictures taped to the chain-link fence around Ground Zero, the

thousands of faces hanging precariously on the fence, flapping as if they could blow away at any moment.

I was released from Fort Jackson, South Carolina, to my high school in Union, New Jersey, to finish my senior year of high school since I opted to use the split-entry program in the Army that allowed seventeen-year-old kids, like me, to join the Army early.

I attended about eighty days of my senior year, excused from school for duty with the National Guard in the aftermath of 9/11. I joined my unit during ceremonies, funerals, parades, ground zero crowd control, and airport patrols carrying M16A2 rifles as the terror level rose to extraordinary heights in the local airports.

There was an older Italian lady at the gate with a picture of her son, an employee of the North Tower.

“Have you seen him?” she asked.

“No, ma’am, I haven’t,” I said.

My boy, he’s here, I know it, I can feel it,” she said with a mother’s intuition.

“No one has been found. I’m sorry,” I looked down at my dust covered combat boots.

We could all feel them, the ghosts of this terrible event lingering in the fear of the breadth of devastation. I turned away from the woman in guilt, let one tear roll down my face as I quickly swiped it away. I was a teenager; the events of the state mobilization forcing me into adulthood in ways I wasn’t prepared for.

The fire in Grenfell Tower was said to be the work of a faulty refrigerator. The building had been overhauled earlier in the year and the new cladding was possibly to blame for the fire spreading so far and fast, the polyethylene of the inside ignited swiftly while the metal of the

exterior contained it, pushing the fire back into the building and into the homes of seventy-one occupants that lost their lives.

Even as I am an empathetic person, the thought of dead bodies has become less difficult to handle as my medical career progresses, but I can still remember the first person I ever watched die.

There was a call to arms within two years of the World Trade Center collapsing under the weight of a terrorist act. I was deployed to Kosovo on Christmas Day, 2003. I was stationed in Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo, as part of Task Force Medical Falcon. It was four months into this deployment, in April of 2004, that at least one Jordanian police officer working with the United Nations opened fire on the American police force as they rode out of a prison gate in a multi-passenger van, the cramped space of the van making it impossible to get away as the bullets pierced the metal of the van.

The altercation being perpetrated by the Jordanians after a reported argument about the United States' recent invasion of Iraq.

A mass-casualty alarm rang out through the base that same night. I slung my rifle across my back and ran to the field hospital with my roommate, Traveé, running alongside me. Soldiers were shouting orders, giving a report on a bullhorn that we had several gunshot wound victims landing in a helicopter within minutes, ETA six minutes they shouted, *ballistic trauma incoming*.

I took off my BDU, battle dress uniform, jacket, and put on a green scrub top. I stood in the receiving hallway with the hospital staff and waited for the initial four-man team to run out to the helicopter and rush one of the officers in on a stretcher. I went next, grabbing the foot of a stretcher carrying the body of a man in his early-forties. He was bleeding from multiple gunshots

wounds to the chest, blood matted to his reddish hair, the dress bandages soaking with crimson blood in the seconds it took us to get him inside and into a makeshift operating room.

I took up space in the corner of the operating room after transferring the patient to the table. The surgeons worked quickly, dissecting down to the bullets and searching for any internal bleeding before they stitched the hole up and moved on to the next one, a nurse rushing in with a cooler of bagged blood, biting the caps off the ends before hooking them up to large bore IVs and squeezing the bags until they ran empty.

I watched as the blood leaked from his wounds faster than it could be infused from a donor. The officer started to pale, the skin bluish and sallow beneath the sharp overhead lights in the room. People were lining up to begin CPR. An alarm squealed, and then his heart stopped and never restarted no matter how hard we pumped down on his chest.

I went to my office and looked at the clock on my desk, it was 336 am. I picked up my landline and called Granger, my husband, in his room since he was also deployed at the time, his first deployment to Iraq. I cried in his ear, the delay in relay between Army bases so extensive I had stopped crying by the time he asked if I was crying. I told him what happened, what I had seen, that we couldn't save the officer. He just listened.

There is something about my husband that allows him to know what I could never say in words.

He deployed to Serbia on a medical mission in September of 2016. The Ohio National Guard sent their Medical Detachment to work with and allow the Angolan Army to observe the operation of U.S. military medical operations in other countries.

My computer started to ring, offering a green video icon as Granger called me during his nightly routine of checking in. I accepted the call and sat close enough that my whole face filled

the screen. His image broke up at first, the pixels of a bad Internet connection shifting slowly. I waited, smiling in anticipation of hearing his unique voice.

“Hey, baby,” he said as the connection became fluid and I noticed he wasn’t alone on screen.

“Hey,” I said, but didn’t offer more.

“These are the Angolans I was telling you about. They wanted to meet you themselves,” he said.

I was mortified. My skin felt too small, my face turned red from embarrassment, and it took me a second to recover and greet them in Portuguese. We had spoken about this the previous night. I told him I did not want to meet them. I was sure they were lovely people, but my grandfather was part of the Portuguese Army that kept independence from the Angolan people for a very long time after colonization. I am part of their struggle even if I am not directly culpable.

Granger told me that I was not responsible for the sins of past generations, and deep down I knew that, but I found it difficult to face people who had been through so much because of the country and culture I was born into, took pride in every day.

“Nós ouvimos muito sobre você do seu marido,” they said they had heard so much about me.

I responded in kind, told them it was my pleasure really, to meet them, and not the other way around.

“Por favor,” I said in closing, “cuide o meu marido.”

It was not lost on me that I had just asked the Angolans to take care of my husband while he was deployed with them, but it was the best response I had in that moment, the repression of apology sitting in the back of my mouth like the burn of bad vodka.

“Esteja salvo,” I repeated in English, “stay safe,” to Granger and the Angolan soldiers.

The light in their eyes changed from curious to determined with those final words. They gave me crisped nods and stepped back from the confinement of the two-dimensional screen. I watched Granger as he rolled his chair into the middle of the monitor. He wished me good night with a slight tilt to one side of his mouth that said, I told you it would be fine, and said he loved me before disconnecting our call.

The rest of my visit to London was dimmed by the Grenfell Tower fire, the constant reminder of it in the pictures multiplying on the glass of shops, the charred shell of what used to be a happy home smoking high in the sky, the closing of Ladbroke Grove tube station because of the fear that the building would collapse at any moment and crush us on the underground train.

Kristy and I grew frustrated with the lack of transportation, being forced to Uber if we didn't want to wait for the too-crowded buses. I didn't want to take the bus because the stop was in front of the café, the constant reminder that sadness seemed to follow me like a family member in the faces of the dead, but my students wanted to meet at the café for workshop a few days later. I agreed. I walked up to the café and looked past the photos to my young students seated at a table inside, a sense of hope entering me in the pink glow of life infusing their cheeks as they laughed at a joke I couldn't hear.

Chapter 16: Father

He is back in my life.

My father sent me a text a few months ago that read, “let’s let bygones be bygones.” At first, I replied, “let’s be bye and gone,” but I couldn’t send it, couldn’t be angry and reply with something extremely rude. I still answer every text he sends even if I know he will disappoint me. After six years of not speaking a word to each other, this was the only way he knew how to reach out to me, the only thing he could force his fingers to write before hitting send.

The truth of my father is that I don’t really know him. I’ve never heard his dreams, his aspirations, what makes him happy as he lies down alone in a rented bedroom at night. The best way I can describe him is by explaining what happened between us six years ago that severed us permanently.

I called my mother to let her know he was in the hospital again. My cousin called from Miami to let me know it was bad this time, septic shock, he told me. I live eight hours away from my parents. I needed that distance from them, moved even when I knew it broke my mother’s heart. My mother decided to visit him. I remember being upset with her, telling her I swore she had Stockholm syndrome when it came to him. I was frightened he’d somehow hurt her even in his weakened state. She promised to call when she got home safely to let me know how he was and that she was unharmed.

It was the afternoon and the sun was sinking below the horizon as I watched my daughter dribble the ball up and down the grass during her soccer practice. My mom called. I answered on the second ring.

“Hey, mom, what’s the word?”

“He’s fine, but my visit ended abruptly,” were her first words.

“Oh no,” I said.

I closed my eyes and rubbed at a temple with my free hand, her clipped words tipping me off that this was going to be a long conversation.

“I told you not to visit, mom. What happened?”

“Did you go see abuelo recently?” she asked.

I had a fortieth birthday party in Miami, Florida, in January of that year. Granger, my fiancé, had a friend who graduated from medical school and was celebrating a birthday. There was cause for a massive celebration. I make it a priority to visit my family whenever I’m in Florida, because my grandparents are ageing. This time was no different. Granger and I took a day away from our friends to go see my grandparents and cousins in Hialeah.

“Remember, I went to see him when I was in Miami for a birthday party,” I said.

“Well, your father is upset about it.”

I considered his feelings for a moment. I wanted to say “so what,” but I stopped myself from answering right away. It’s always been this way, one of us upset with the other. I wanted to believe he was upset because I hadn’t called him, but I knew it was something bigger by my mother’s reaction. She has been angry in the past when he’s called her fat or told her she was getting uglier as she got older.

“What did he say to you, mom?”

My mother didn’t need to hear from me that I didn’t care he was upset. She already knew. I cared that she was upset.

She was quiet for a long time; so long I thought she hung up.

“Mom,” I said, “are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here honey,” she responded.

I gave her as long as she needed to tell me what he'd said. I didn't ask if she was crying but I could hear the tightness of oncoming tears in her voice. The same rasp I heard as a child when she sat at the dining room table with letters marked with red stamps on the front.

"When I walked in," she said, "he asked if I was ashamed of you."

I laughed at that.

"Ashamed of me for what this time?" I asked.

Shame for him is like a revolving door around our Cuban culture, fall in line with his beliefs or live without him on the other side. Something I have always found so confusing. It's a communist country that is failing its people in many ways and here we are, living an American life with outdated ideals of a past we can't let go of, the Cuban elders chastising my generation because we try to live in a different way. My father feels it's acceptable for him to follow a president against immigration when we are immigrants, but I am not allowed to love and accept Blacks because he believes we are born of Spanish kings and must restrain ourselves from committing racial suicide by refusing to have children outright or having them with people unlike us, and yet, he supposes that I do not understand the world.

Finally, she told me. Whispered the short sentence as if she said it low enough I would never figure out what she was trying to tell me and it would get lost in the particles as it traveled through the phone line between us.

"For taking a nigger home to see your family," she said.

I knew then that he would never get past his own mind to follow my life in its path.

In fact, the writing of this essay is causing an argument between my mother and me. I called her, let her know my mentor would like for me to add a separate essay about him because his shadow snakes through my stories like the darkness that sometimes envelopes the light. The

issue of my father needs its own space to breathe, to suck the darkness into the lungs enough to recapture the light he steals.

“Tell me about the time you pulled the knife on him,” I asked, “what were you thinking in that moment?”

“Your generation wants to talk about everything,” she said in response.

“I’d rather talk about it so we can heal, mom.”

“These things are private, Jessica.”

What my mother considers private is part of my life as her daughter, as their daughter. I remember only the negative aspects of my father. I rely on my mother for these conversations in my efforts to explore him, to figure out who he is before he’s gone and it’s too late.

“I need you to shun your Portuguese upbringing and just talk to me,” I said.

A traditional Portuguese family does not readily discuss feelings. We ignore issues in the hopes they will just go away or someone will die and take their share of the problems with them. It is a colonial sentiment we have not been able to break free from even though my family has been in the United States for many decades.

She told me he’s my father and that she doesn’t want to speak about him in a negative manner, but I believe she doesn’t want the world to know we are flawed, that she is a victim, that I am a victim, that we are a broken system of oxygen-deprived roots.

I started to beg. I started to get angry with her silence, the lack of sound reverberating in my ear drums the way it does when you drive with just one window cracked.

“It was self-defense,” she raised her voice on the last word.

I pulled the phone away and looked at it in shock. I pictured her on the other end of the line, her aqua reading glasses perched on the tip of her button nose as she held the iPad with one

hand and her phone with the other, the stark white hairs intermixed in her raven hair flying as she shouted at me. Her seated on the couch in a rolled up ball made out of comfortable pajamas and her small curvy frame, my stepfather walking into the room to ask if everything's alright.

“Of course, it was, mom,” I said, “I know it was self-defense.”

They were shouting at each other. I watched from my bunkbed as my father reared back and punched her in the stomach so hard she doubled over in pain, the whoop of air expelling from her lungs on impact as her body contracted. She crawled the short distance to the kitchen and used the cabinets to get on her feet. She reached in and grabbed a knife from the block similar to the one my grandmother would sit on the front stoop with when my father came to visit me after we moved out.

“But, what were you thinking?” I asked her.

I know my own story, my past marriage being so similar to my childhood, but I wanted to truly know when my mother gained her strength in the aftermath of her bad choices. She told me she knew in that moment that she would have killed him if he kept abusing her, that she knew I couldn't be left without both parents if she did what she thought of doing.

I'm sad she so readily defended herself from my question.

“I don't want to talk about this anymore,” she said, “nothing can change the past.”

I told her she was wrong. We can't change what happened, but we can grow from the ashes of it. I told her to take the pain of that final gut-shot and drag it up through her mouth until it breaks free of the surface and finds its own life, the life we never had because of my father.

Chapter 17: The Life of a Lung Nodule

It can all be gone with an x-ray. The initial test result is positive. My husband slides these findings into our routine Tuesday afternoon conversation. After some debate about making an appointment to register, he has finally done it eight years after returning from his last tour in Iraq, where he spent a year as a member of an Army unit exposed long-term to the burn pits near Camp Anaconda, Balad. He watches me tentatively as he recounts his appointment at the VA for the Burn Pit Registry evaluation and physical. I can picture it from the office in our home, the moment he wraps his arms tightly around the x-ray bucky on the wall, a stranger pressing the trigger behind a lead shield that sends the charge through his chest and into the film plate, our lives changing forever with the addition of a 4x4 lung nodule within his frame like a constant reminder of the sins of its host.

I lower my gaze to his chest. He tells me I can't see it, that it's within the fibrous network of his delicate lung tissue, but it's there. I see it glowing silver on his brown skin, lying over his breastbone in the rectangular shape of his dog tags. I glance past him to the neatly folded triangular flags and colorful medals in shadow boxes on the wall behind him and wonder if it was all worth it, our years of service, this intractable alien that lingers from that service like an angry private on latrine duty.

I turn to anger. It slips onto my face in a frown that hides my fear of what the orb of cells is doing in this moment. I want to reach in his mouth, pull his jaw to its breaking point, and shout into the filament of his lungs. Beg for it to be a benign mold spore, plead with it to shrink and disappear, to leave him in the relative peace he's had since the War on Terrorism has cooled and our country has switched focus. He's calm as he soothes my fears with placating words of positive energy and hope, but I can hear the air as it struggles to get past the nodule, that saws in

and out of his chest as he tries to hide his shortness of breath. He's relieved to finally have a possible answer to the trouble he's been having on his daily jogs, but I worry about a future we may not have for the decisions we once made in order for two relatively poor kids from the slums of New Jersey to go to college without the burden of debt.

The unfiltered words of these thoughts are spilling from my mouth, suffocating the space between us as we face off, his calm, my anger, the emotions bouncing between us like a tennis match, the ball lying near his alveoli. My husband gets up and reaches for me, draws me into his body, cuddles me along the territory of his possible demise. I want to make a fist and bang on his chest until it gives up the answers we need to move forward, the confidence we need in this broken system of healthcare for veterans to call us in a timely manner with a final read on the x-ray, an accurate diagnosis and treatment plan, but I tell myself I won't hold my breath even while I pray my husband's won't give up on him.

I lay my ear over his chest and listen to the whooshing lullaby of his heart, the stuttering of his breath like the tinkling of bells at the close of the Civil War. I can feel a tear welling in my left eye as if of its own accord just to be closer to him. I feel it slip down my cheek to wet the old, gray Army t-shirt he wears when he's lounging around the house.

I'm jumping to conclusions, but he allows me that freedom in this moment of uncertainty. There isn't much we can say to each other in the present that will impact the future and this pill is the hardest to swallow, it sitting in my throat while the acidic burn of it coats the inside of my esophagus. He lifts my face toward his. I'm ready to scream my frustrations to the world, to anyone who will listen, but he stops me with a hand over my lips. "Save it," he tells me as a gentle finger swipes at my cheek, "you never know when we'll need it most." I nod in a subdued way, the soft hairs bouncing along my neck as I try not to linger in the pain.

Our children are in the living room watching cartoons and laughing, crunching popcorn so loudly I can hear them from the office on the opposite side of the house. Our two-year-old son shouts for his father and comes barreling around the corner like a thirty-pound rhinoceros. Winded, he looks between us and asks to be picked up. My husband reaches down and scoops the boy up as if he's weightless, looks down at him in a long lingering way, and then turns to join the children in the living room, his loud chewing joining the chorus as he settles down to watch TV.

Vita

Jessica Granger received her MFA from The University of Texas El Paso. She spent ten years in the Army and is a veteran of the Global War in Terrorism. Jessica is also a scuba divemaster, and an interventional radiographer at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. She teaches interventional radiology at local colleges and coaches high school field hockey. Jessica's work can be found in SHANTI Journal, The Molotov Cocktail Magazine, Que Pasa, OSU?, TheNewVerse.News, As You Were, and Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review.

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This thesis/dissertation was typed by Jessica Granger.