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Mother of Three Drowns Children and Other Stories

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MOTHER OF THREE DROWNS CHILDREN
AND OTHER STORIES

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2012

Dedication

For Polly, Geoffrey,
Lisa, Robin, and
of course,
Mother and Dad.

MOTHER OF THREE DROWNS CHILDREN
AND OTHER STORIES

by

LAURA L. STUBBINS, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
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Preface

“Somebody tells a story, let’s say, and afterwards you ask, ‘Is it true?’ and if the answer matters, you’ve got your answer” (O’Brien 82).

Underpinnings

I am an unreliable narrator. I came by my unreliability honestly, born to a couple of would-be beatnik apparitions, my words always lost in the din of their chain-rattling and moaning, spoon-feeding me secrets and teaching me never to ask why. “Loose lips sink ships,” warned my spirit keepers—both weaned on the U.S. propaganda of World War II. But unlike Billy Pilgrim, Kurt Vonnegut’s protagonist in the anti-war story *Slaughterhouse-Five*, those two got *stuck* in time, not the other way around. My parents chose to be anchored in a narrative of their own making, with no beginning or ending, just despair and deadening routine—and they demanded that of me. A good southern ghost needs to stay put. Raise a family. Rattle her chains at the right time. I wasn’t a good little ghost girl, but you should know this already. With a childhood like that, how could I be anything but an unreliable narrator?

Vonnegut is an unreliable narrator, too, beginning *Slaughterhouse-Five* with succinct perfection: “All this happened, more or less” (Vonnegut 1). Tim O’Brien’s short story, “How to Tell a True War Story” opens with a brief three-word statement, “This is true” (O’Brien 67). But we learn O’Brien isn’t a reliable narrator, either. Eventually, he reveals, “That’s a true story that never happened” (O’Brien 84). In these brief snippets both Vonnegut and O’Brien offer us an entire narrative, a whole short story to consider in less than ten words. Is the narrator in either story lying? If the narrators are not being untruthful, why are their perspectives so flawed? Why are Vonnegut and O’Brien compelled to distort their narrative perspective in the first place? Why do I?

Let me try to re-characterize my upbringing. I grew up in Beeville, Texas, the youngest of four children. My father was an orphan, an alcoholic, and a small-town newspaper linotype operator—a printer. A master of justification, he knew where to break lines, on the page and in life, right justification both literal and figurative. My mother was willingly trapped in a chaotic relationship with my father for almost fifty years, a marriage fueled by fist fights and Pearl beer. My parent’s marriage worsened when their oldest son died in a car accident at the age of sixteen, when I was only a year old. After my brother’s death, my father grew more invisible, disappearing after work to his own room, to be by himself. I was lucky for the time we shared at the Toot and Tote bar, where I developed distaste for orange juice in tin cans at an early age—a detail I share in my story “The Drinking-Bird Universe.” My mother spent her life preoccupied with her son’s death and the dead in general—obsessed with astrology, psychics, astral guides, and the occult. No way could I compete with my brother’s ghost, and my mother, the queen of competition, took pride in never letting her children win.

I’m using pathos in an attempt to persuade you to empathize with me, but maybe I’m exaggerating, or I’m biased. Sure, I had a rough childhood. My childhood was like yours, for better or worse, and it’s in the past. Perhaps I’m just writing the preface to my thesis, trying to get inside my own head to explain the techniques I’ve learned, and why I write the way I do. In writing, I minimize the significance of events that happened and exaggerate ones that didn’t. I do this in part, to protect the living, but also to draw the reader closer to the narrative. As a child, I didn’t have a frame of reference for experiencing things simply as they were. My mother taught me to see things as she wished they were, or how they might have been. When I write, I create families like mine, and families I’ve known, families with secrets and ghosts.

When a writer is raised with compromised perceptions, under constant threats from a domineering mother who tells her children repeatedly never to write things on paper—that written words would destroy the entire family—it does make one wonder if ships would sink if a version of the truth was recorded? Being silenced as a child made me feel that I had no truth, that truth was dangerous, or even wrong. I was taught early to tell lies: Daddy was sick (not drunk). Mommy couldn't come to the phone because she was busy (not having a psychotic episode). Perhaps being taught to lie so early in childhood gave me a head start in telling stories, even if it would be years later before I would be able to face writing my own truth on paper.

In graduate school, several times I had to face my insecurities about whether it was safe to be a writer. When writing "Mop Buckets and Birthday Cards," I worried my story about a friend who'd murdered his wife, really wasn't my story to tell, and afraid that one day I'd be confronted by the murder about the story, if he lives long enough for his release date (or is let out early). Fortunately, professors and classmates were supportive, and in addition to learning writing techniques in graduate school to find my voice and express myself through creative writing, ultimately, I gave myself the permission to be heard.

Workshopping classes validated the growth of my creative voice, providing feedback and support. Letting others read fiction based on my upbringing didn't cause the earth to spin off its axis. I grew less grandiose, less anxious, and in the process became a more authentic writer as I learned to write more about what I know, what was true for me—whether it was true for my parents or not. I used the skills I was taught as a child under the pretense of protecting my family to save myself from silence.

Unreliability

I wasn't raised by actual ghosts, just mentally-ill parents. Aside from the familiarity with untrustworthy people, how does that make me a writer who favors the unreliable narrator and realistic fiction? Exploring my thesis, I had to consider what it means to be an unreliable narrator. In Madison Smart Bell's text, *Narrative Design: A Writer's Guide to Structure*, an unreliable narrator is defined as "A character whose version of the events of the story is not to be entirely trusted" (Bell 374). In Ann Charters, *The Story and its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, the definition goes a step further, describing the unreliable narrator as, "A fictional character telling the story whose knowledge or judgment about events and other characters is so flawed or limited as to make him or her a misleading guide to her reader" (Charters 1816). Such a narrator may intentionally withhold information or flat-out lie. Unreliable narrators don't have to be consistent. They can be untrustworthy, erratic, abusive, emotionally incestuous and volatile—like a so-called dysfunctional family.

In struggling with the uncertainty of my childhood perceptions, I have come to embrace the unreliable narrator. Literary critic Stanley Chatman explains the idea further, "In 'unreliable narration' the narrator's account is at odds with the implied reader surmises about the story's real intentions. The story undermines the discourse" (Chatman 233). Undermining the discourse is more complicated than it looks. In several of my stories, I achieve this effect by creating characters that possess deep unmet needs, a technique I learned in Professor Dan Chacón's Advanced Fiction class. In my story, "Time of Stay: Transient," the narrator longs for unconditional love, which drives her to examine what she knows about the effects of her brother's death on her family. Characters aching for something lacking in their lives give a story momentum, guiding the plot and creating the thematic level of a story. In my story, "The

Bicycle,” the undercurrent of a mother’s rage at her child rises just short of the story’s surface, while the two characters seethe in the parking lot.

Assemblage

For my thesis, I wrote a collection of realistic short stories using everyday vernacular and repetition of themes such as death and isolation in several of my stories such as “Let Go” and “Lucille.” I maintain realism by minimizing overt metaphor to take a pragmatic look at complex relationships. For example, in my story “The Bicycle,” the supposed object serves as a metaphor for the mother and son’s relationship. The bicycle, like their relationship, won’t fit in the space allotted and something is clearly missing; however, I try to keep the descriptions straightforward and downplay obvious symbols to maintain a sense of realism.

Originally, I’d planned to arrange my thesis stories in chronological order, opening with stories about childhood and ending with stories told from an adult perspective, but I wanted to develop a collection of stories like Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, which reads like a memoir, but is fiction. In O’Brien’s work, one can read any of the stories in any order. They are complete stories with a beginning, conflict and ending, but at the same time, characters bleed through from one story to the next. The characters Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon, among others, are repeated often, like the parallelism of the phrase “They carried...” throughout the book. I arranged my collection by alternating shorter pieces with longer pieces, opening with a story told by an adult narrator speaking about events in the present, and followed by stories told by an adult narrator reflecting on childhood.

Characters, altered versions of my mother and father, drift in and out of my short stories about adult children, still waiting for unconditional love and affection, as does a character based on my cousin, who appears in “Bullets and Bracelets” and “The Other Girl in the Photo.” I

attempt to mimic the randomness of memory by including characters that may be the same individuals in different stories, and ordering stories so that themes of loss and motifs of childhood are apparent but still surprising, even if the settings and themes are similar.

As I consider what Flannery O'Connor wrote regarding her own writing—"Much of my fiction takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable" (Charters 1625)—I attempt to blend truth with fiction by including memories of my childhood and people I've met, blended with strangers. I leave readers to decide what is plausible and which parts of my stories are true, because I want my writing to be evocative in a way that makes readers temporarily forget to question the authenticity and feel genuine emotions common with the themes of my work: empathy, sadness, flashes of joy, and surprise.

When I write, I ask myself if a character's well-hidden lie will make the seams in my narrative fabric more invisible—wanting my readers to be lost in a seamless story told by an effective narrator, I try to change the narrative voice while while themes of death and loss stay constant. Emulating the voice of the unreliable narrator is my passion, and I've spent my graduate studies practicing literary techniques such as distancing, a technique in which my narrators are unaware of the other characters' thoughts and can only make assumptions. I hope to peak readers' curiosity by creating narrative distance by withholding information and dropping hints early in the story about the outcome. In my story "Mop Buckets and Birthday Cards" the effect of narrative distance makes the readers question why the protagonist continues to stay emotionally invested with a criminal she resents.

The first time I read Ernest Hemingway I was in high school, and his brilliant use of concision was wasted on me. I didn't realize until rereading Hemingway at the graduate level, with insight from professors and other students, the full impact of the writer's conciseness.

Often, I attempt to use similar brevity or an economy of words when I write. In Hemingway's short story, "Hills Like White Elephants" he creates rhythm and rapid narrative with sharp lines like:

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at a line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry (Charters 540).

I admire Hemingway so much that I use a quotation from "Hills Like White Elephants" as an epigraph for my story, "Where we Went." I often attempt to emulate Hemingway's writing by using parataxis to join simple sentences with or without conjunctions and altering sentence length in a way which adds distortion, distance, and abruptness in tone, while creating a rhythm for the reader. I open my story "Bullets and Bracelets" with tight sentences to give a quick description of Wonder Woman: "Yellow stars on tight blue panties. A golden eagle spread between her generous breasts. A boomerang. A lasso at her hip." This use of parataxis and short sentences shows readers a quick snapshot of the comic book hero while emphasizing the contrast in the femininity represented by panties and the masculinity of a boomerang. The technique allows me to draw the readers in close to the physical body, briefly push them away, and then bring them back to the sexually-charged image of a woman's hip.

The short stories in my thesis depict characters, unreliable narrators, facing loss or reflecting on what is absent from their lives. I attempt to address themes including gender, gender preference, and sexuality in stories such as "Where we Went," "Nova," "Bullets and Bracelets," and in "Sheila the Dolphin Girl," where gender is addressed in a fantastical way, but written in a realistic manner. Sheila wants to be a sea creature, instead of a different gender.

While Shelia seems willing to travel any length to fulfill her wish, she ironically avoids learning to swim.

The theme of traumatic bonding occurs in many of my stories, but is most apparent in “Wedding Dress” and “The Drinking Bird Universe.” In both stories, a daughter faces her emotional ties to ineffective parents lacking appropriate boundaries. In “The Radio” and “Length of Stay: Transient,” the protagonists are told to keep quiet and not ask questions, focusing on themes of separation, isolation and silence. I contemplate themes of deception and lies in “Nova,” in which a girl falls in love with an older woman, only to discover the woman isn’t who she claims. “Let Go” and “Sister Assumption” reveal primary motifs of childhood, early adulthood, family, and themes of silencing and death. Death is the most recurring theme in this collection of stories. In many of these stories, either someone has died recently or the narrator reflects on someone already dead. The dead become an intangible loss for the unreliable narrator to overcome.

While writer Umberto Eco suggests, “One of the principal functions of literature lies in these lessons about fate and death” (Eco 15), instead, I attempt to use death, or the dead, in many of my stories as a MacGuffin, a plot device in which something drives the protagonist to action and which keeps the narrative moving forward. William Faulkner uses a dead body in his story, “As I Lay Dying” in this manner, and the most classic example of a MacGuffin is likely the Maltese Falcon, the motivating object in the film of the same name. I use death in this way in short stories such as “Mother of Three Drowns Children,” a story framed by a funeral that drives the narrator to act. In “Length of Stay: Transient,” the mysterious dead brother that the narrator never knew serves to push her to explore how the family’s silence around the boy’s death has

affected her and her family. In my story “Let Go,” the death of a teenager’s grandfather encourages the protagonist to stand up to his controlling mother.

Point of View

I’ve written most of the stories in this collection in first person point of view. I chose this point of view because it gives readers a sense of immediacy and intimacy, and it allows them to form a fast connection with the narrator. I recognize that this point of view has limitations—it is difficult for a narrator to describe herself objectively to the readers, or for readers to distinguish the narrator from the author. The continuous repetition of “I” in a short text can seem narcissistic and since the first person point of view allows the readers to only see what the narrator can see, it makes creating subplots in a short story difficult. Since writing in first person makes it easier to fall into a pattern of telling rather than showing readers what is happening, I’ve had to work hard to show the readers more.

Despite the challenges, first person point of view allows me to give my short stories a memoir-like quality, as if they are nonfiction. I can present unreliability in the narration, and offer readers a child’s or young adult’s unreliable perceptions, like in my story “Sister Assumption,” in which the protagonist, a young girl, feels awkward yet doesn’t fully understand that the nun has placed her in a covert sexual situation. In Tzvetan Todorov’s *Introduction to Poetics*, he writes “Perception informs us about what is perceived as well as the perceiver: it is the first type of information that we are calling objective, the second subjective” (Todorov 34). First person narration, like other narrative points of view, allows readers to feel close to a narrator and stay connected to the narrator’s inner thoughts, motives and biases.

Exploration, Identity and Technique

During most of my early childhood, my mother, at best, was suicidal. She constantly threatened to take me with her when she killed herself, rationalizing that I'd be a burden to my father if left behind. Waiting for the moment at every holiday gathering, she'd announce her suicidal plans at the dinner table in the presence of her parents and siblings, but they never seemed to take notice. At my mother's worst, she was violent and abusive. She broke dishes and promises on purpose, blamed me, and left me to clean up the mess. My thesis is entitled after my opening story about woman's reflections on the loss of her own children, but it is also entitled for my overbearing mother, a woman who metaphorically drowned her three living children.

My mother and father's marriage was so damaged that they didn't share a bedroom when I was growing up. I took the place of my father, having to sleep with my mother in her bed until I was in the eighth grade. Why she cast me out then, leaving me ashamed for no longer being wanted, I'll never know. My mother told my grown siblings and other family members that I was neurotic and afraid of the dark. This was in line with many of my childhood problems, according to my mother: I rejected the breast as a baby and refused to take a bottle. As a toddler, I preferred scavenging for food rather than eating regular meals. I had a pacifier until I was four because I was nervous and too talkative. My mother's inadequacies as a parent became my failures.

So intent on controlling my perceptions, my mother demanded to write all of my school book reports and essays for me until I was in high school. She said I was too stupid to do it myself, but I suspect she worried I'd write about my home life if given the chance. Her fiction became mine. In my story "Where we Went," I allow the narrator's to hint at this truth from my childhood when the narrator mentions her grandmother insisted on composing her school essays.

I was in my late twenties before I could complete the writing assignments necessary to finish my undergraduate degree because I was so stifled by mother mother's control. I was in my early thirties before I attempted to write fiction. Until then, I second guessed my grocery lists, and worried that I might leave a list behind in the basket, filled with misspellings that would bring shame on my family. Because much of my creativity springs from this type of emotional imprisonment, in which I've struggled to trust my own observation, I embrace the unreliable narrator and writing in first person point of view. In this collection of short stories, every narrator is unreliable, but she still has a voice of their own, and is telling her own story, in her own way. I am thankful I don't question my reality today, at least not often.

My father, in addition to being an alcoholic, was empty and obsessive compulsive—counting ceiling and floor tiles wherever he went, shifting his manual transmission at pre-determined landmarks—he was only the specter of what a parent should be. He masked his hatred for women and his own life with card tricks and magic. He'd take me to school, but forgot to pick me up—as if I'd disappeared. His pet name for my mother was “The Leech,” and he and my mother chased around the house with hammers and guns. My mother, domineering and masculine, and my father, effeminate, seemed fairly matched in their battles. To this day, my mother won't admit my father was a drunk, that our home was a battlefield. When she speaks of my father she describes him as “quiet” and “a true gentleman.” This is the truth I'm supposed to hold dear, that I had perfect parents, who did their best with unruly, ungrateful children.

After my mother's initial fury when I came out as a lesbian in my early twenties, she shrugged it off saying, “Your father and I always knew one of our four kids was apt to be a queer.” I attempt to address the themes of gender, gender preference and sexuality I questioned as a child due to my parent's gender roles being so reversed in “Where we Went” and “Bullets

and Bracelets.” Straight or gay, when children aren’t allowed to explore their individual sexuality, and have no siblings at home to compare themselves with, when it isn’t an affirmative decision but instead left up to others, it doesn’t feel like a strong position to take. The characters in my story struggle to determine why they feel so different than other people, as I did when I was much younger.

During my undergraduate studies in psychology, I learned that children must cultivate trust as a basic building block for healthy relationships. Clearly, I had missed this developmental stage, overwhelmed by my chaotic family environment. Left struggling with constant anxiety over whether I had permission to explore or ask questions, I learned to piece snippets of information together from a child’s point of view. Unable to get information in a regular way, like asking questions, I found other ways of gathering facts, such as becoming vigilant in observing my abusive parent’s facial cues and arbitrary gestures. Because children are naturally egocentric, I constantly questioned whether it was okay for me to be myself. Was it okay for me to be a writer? Was it okay for me to make personal discoveries? Worse still, was I the ghost, the monster, to blame for my family’s suffering? I sought out others like me, in the safe realm of literary works trying to validate my curiosity and self-identity.

In the literary world, I relate most to the unreliable narrators, with similar struggles of self-identity and perception—imperfect actors telling a story we can’t entirely trust: characters like Benjy and Quentin in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*; Charles Marlow in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*; and many of Edgar Allan Poe’s protagonists. These characters became my surrogate family—their stories dire, their character's dog-paddling around a circling drain, many characters mired in secrets and half-truths, acting out of a lack of insight and/or narrating with intentional omissions of truth, all

aching, unreliable, often unlikeable characters, fighting for narrative control by any means, at any cost—much like the two characters in Ernest Hemingway’s short story, “Hills Like White Elephants.” The man and Jig both struggle to be heard, but neither directly addresses the issue at stake. Instead, they choose to bicker instead of discussing terminating Jig’s pregnancy, never overtly mentioned.

My thesis has been a twofold challenge to complete. First, because my background was in psychology, not literature, I’ve had to learn much of the language of creative writing from scratch. (Had I ever seen Freytag’s Triangle before? Prosody: Is that good or bad?) I also had to relearn terms I’d last used in high school several decades ago, when the five-paragraph essay was the standard and deviation was frowned on by my teachers.

Soon after joining the MFA program, I realized my passion for short fiction and realism and began devoting my time to practicing anti-artifice and avoiding contrivance in my writing. Inspired by the ability to tell a single story in a few number of pages encouraged me to listen carefully to my professors, and read as much literary fiction as possible. I often thought of Raymond Carver’s famous comment as a prayer, “I hate tricks. At the first sign of a trick or a gimmick in a piece of fiction, a cheap trick or even an elaborate trick, I run for cover. Tricks are ultimately boring” (Charters 1579). But how does a writer avoid gimmicks and clichés?

In literary writing, learning to show and tell, is as important as reading the works of literature and practicing technique. While classes in fiction, short fiction, prose and short stories helped me hone my writing skills, I was surprised at the impact a screenwriting class had on my development and thought-processes as a writer. I’d never grasped the importance or difficulty of showing vs. telling so clearly, or considered the impact anchoring the summary to a strong voice and unique details will have for readers.

In my screenwriting class, I learned there is no room for internal judgments; the characters must act in a way that indicates their thoughts and motive. The passage of time must be taken into account, because each page of a script translates to a minute of film. There must be conflict at an appropriate point and smart details about every character and his or her setting. As Raymond Carver states, “It’s possible, in a poem or a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language and to endow those things... with immense, even startling power” (Charters 1581). Practicing the discipline of screenwriting, writing in present tense from the protagonist’s point of view, using precise language, capturing every character’s gesture, and learning to develop characters possessing memorable characteristics, carried over, improving my ability to craft fiction.

Before entering UTEP’s Creative Writing program, I’d never taken a poetry class. Learning about poetic form had a similar positive impact on my writing, like screenwriting. Poetry is difficult for me, forcing me not to just look at a stanza, but at each word’s placement and significance. Once I learned the foundations of poetry, every word in my short stories seemed superfluous and verbose. I began cutting out flowery adverbs and fat language, so much so, that sometimes I was confused by my own minimalist writing and had to go back add information to ensure my writing gave enough details to make sense to the reader.

The intensive study of poetic technique taught me about alliteration and repetition, which when used sparingly has a dramatic effect on prose. I use repetition and alliteration when I can, to captivate the reader, but I try not to overdo it. One of my favorite examples of alliteration and repetition in fiction is from *The Things They Carried*, “The dead had been dead for more than a day” (O’Brien 243). O’Brien’s repetition of the word dead and the sound of the letter “d” become a liturgy for the bodies of the men he must load on the trucks at Vietnam.

Attention to detail and editing out what isn't critical to the story is required for writing with clarity. T.R. Hummer in his essay, "Against Metaphor" offers excellent guidance on the importance of syntax, brevity, and overuse of figurative language:

There is, I think, a tendency in language toward compression over time, toward the leaving out of connectives that become burdensome with long repetition. The language wants to become increasingly dense and efficient... It requires a vigilant mind, sometimes, to be aware of the differences among metaphors, lies and statements of fact... Another danger of metaphor is that it may allow or even encourage us to forget literal truths (Pack and Partini 87-88).

This advice seemed particularly on target when considering my struggles to write what seemed plausible to me, in a way that felt authentic for me and my readers.

Poetry also offered me inspiration to write fiction based on my own life, something I tried to avoid out of fear of family disapproval. Consider the first stanza of Li-Young Lee's poem, "This Hour and What is Dead":

Tonight my brother, in heavy boots, is walking
through bare rooms over my head,
opening and closing doors.

What could he be looking for in an empty house?

What could he possibly need there in heaven (Lee 35)?

Lee tells us a story, in this stanza, in each line. While the title informs the readers that there has been a death, they may not realize until reading the fifth line that the dead person is the narrator's brother. In addition to the lesson in line, the poem made me wonder if Lee knew his brother when he was still living—inspiring my story "Length of Stay: Transient," about a

woman's relationship with the brother she never knew. Poetry helped me realize that the easier one recognizes oneself, and acknowledge one's own perceptions, the easier it is to write authentically.

Ownership

The second hurdle in writing my thesis was recognizing and owning my perceptions—not just learning to find my literary voice, but giving myself the permission to share it with others.

The line between lying and truth becomes blurred growing up in a dysfunctional family. Telling a lie can be perceived as an act of good. Lying to cover abuse, neglect, and addiction becomes normal. What is the larger truth? What is best for the family? And who gets to name the truth?

My identity as a writer made me consider these questions, scrutinizing the possibility of writing fiction perceivable as authentic. It made me reconsider what I'd learned from my childhood about whose narrative it is to tell. Having a positive environment in which to share my fiction enabled me to become more comfortable with sharing, and in turn encouraged me to write more and try new techniques. The more I submitted my short fiction for workshopping, the more I grew comfortable including more of my true self in my writing. Through the revision process, I learned to make my work more authentic. I didn't set out to create a collection of stories focusing on family, but through revision this is my end product.

On Closure

In the revision process of writing, I now dismiss the happy ending, recognizing it as trite. I've accepted that real life is often disordered and messy and in doing so, I've stopped trying to force closure on the reader. Trying to give every story a happy ending is tempting; a happy ending is easier to write, especially when it is grounded in an unconscious attempt to repair

childhood damage. I had no control over outcomes as a child. As a young adult, when I let go of the fantasy that I'd be rescued by a fairy godmother, I became a fan of tragedies, stories with grim endings, and plots whose characters can find love and redemption only after death or ruin, like in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Jane Eyre*. As I've matured as a writer, I've understood that tidy endings don't satisfy readers of literary fiction. It is more authentic, more meaningful if the reader can come to his or her own conclusion.

In *Writers on Writing*, Tim O'Brien states, "There is something both false and trivial about a story that arrives at absolute closure (O'Brien 181). In graduate school I grew to love short stories like Nadine Gordimer's "The Diamond Mine," with enigmatic and parataxical endings, "If he had been killed in that war, they [my family] would have heard, through the grandmother's connections. Is it still you; somewhere, old?" (Gardiner 505) and stories such as Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," which ends with "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease – of a joy that kills (Charters 252). I am also inspired by Haruki Murakami's endings in stories like "New York Mining Disaster" that read like newspaper clippings seeming related only to the title of the work, not the story itself or "Dabchick" that has a sharp reversal in point of view. I attempt this technique in my short stories, "Mother of Three Drowns Children" and "The Bicycle," leaving the protagonists musing about the outcome of the day's events and leaving the reader to wonder if the story really took place.

In Walter Besant's "The Art of Fiction," the novelist urges writers, "never [to] go beyond your own experience" (Besant 18). But if the advice is to write what you know, I must ask myself *what do I know?* What is my experience? Raised by parents who withheld information and lied to hide the truth about their unhappy existence, I grew up constantly questioning my own perceptions in an almost Faulknerian setting in South Texas. My grandparents lived in a

dilapidated Civil War mansion, crumbling in disrepair, like something out of *The Sound and the Fury* or “A Rose for Emily.” My mother continually revised her account of her first meeting with my father, her reason for staying married, our family’s social status, and my childhood, so I’m never sure how events played out, or if they really took place. My father rarely gave an account of anything. I am unable to verify or deny much of my family history, despite a highly organized family tree dating back to before the Mayflower.

I was raised in a family that showed little separation between fact and fiction. My grandmother had plenty of money yet liked to shoplift cheap make up from the grocery store. My family never spoke about my brother after his death. My mother’s brother was in the local police force, so when the cops found me wandering unattended downtown as a small child, they returned me to my parents without filing reports against them, sparing my family’s reputation, again and again. My perception of reality affects my writing. At times I choose to fictionalize what may or may not be nonfiction. It was a giant step in my personal development as a writer when I let myself attempt to write stories like Vonnegut and O’Brien’s stories that never happened and did—simultaneous truths and lies.

Losing and the Short Story

Lex Williford writes, “The history of the short story is the history of losers... one can’t begin writing powerful short stories until one comes to accept one’s losses... the contemporary short story is a celebration of those who lose” (Williford, *History of the Short Story*, Clip 1). I feel my thesis is a celebration of those who lose: In “Nova,” a young college girl loses some of her naivety when she discovers the secret her lover holds; in “Sister Annunciation,” a child blames herself for a nun’s behavior which compromises the young girl’s innocence. I depict mothers in their most unflattering moments of motherhood in “The Bicycle,” “Let Go,” and “The

Wedding Dress,” stories, not so loosely based on family, brothers, people who are only ghosts, and imagined relationships. Yet these characters gain something as well as losing—the chance at redemption or at least insight.

Writer Andrew Michael Roberts, in his essay, “Enchiladas for the Stolen Boys,” writes, “I came to real writing informally, on my own... but it was at home, alone with ghosts, that I wrote for real” (McDowell and Rzicznek 21). For me, the opposite is true, more or less. My writing became more real when I knew I would be sharing it with the living, specifically classmates and professors, when I understood that what I wrote was a reflection of my truth, not my mother’s. Truth is important to me in real life, but in my fiction, I value the appearance of truth. Call it authenticity if you want. How can writers capture the truth on paper? Especially, writers like me, raised on half-truths and lies? How can I write realistic fiction when as a child nothing was what it seemed? I can try.

I began writing short fiction first, not feeling as if I had the authorial voice for a novel. Alice Munro, one of my favorite contemporary writers, said in a *New York Times* interview, “I started writing them [short stories] because I didn't have time to write anything else... And then I got used to writing stories, so I saw my material that way, and now I don't think I'll ever write a novel” (Rothstein). I see my material that way, too. Munro gave me the ability to realize that a short story is its own perfect genre and granted me the permission to focus on learning how to craft short fiction.

The concept of reality, and whose version of reality is being perceived, is something I often consider in regards to my writing because my reality was distorted by my mother when I was a child. If my mother’s truth was the only truth, I couldn’t be an individual and my own

experience was inaccurate. I don't struggle with the same issues as an adult, but under extreme circumstances, I'll stop and check my perspective.

Revision

Before joining a writing program, I assumed that the writing process lasted far longer than the revision process. In fact, I hadn't considered revision much at all. Now, I often think Creative Writing programs should be named "Creative Writing and Revision Programs." One of the most invaluable aspects of being in a MFA program in Creative Writing is learning to participate in workshops and discovering how integral the process of revision is to the writing process. At the beginning of the program, I'd often made jarring, unintentional changes in point of view. Workshopping my short stories helped me learn that, "In general, once you establish your narrative point of view, you should stick with it" (LaPlante 205). Using feedback from students, I learned writing in first person was one of my strengths. The program allowed me time to build on foundational skills, to experiment and eventually to find and share my voice.

So, let me try revising my opening one last time. My father died on a Tuesday, ten days before I turned thirty. I always thought he'd be the parent who died last, after a lengthy illness, lung cancer or cirrhosis, but I was wrong. He woke up with a severe headache and died the same morning of a brain aneurysm.

When my mother told me over the phone that there would only be a funeral, and that my father wouldn't be on display like a piece of meat for a viewing, I couldn't shake the childhood memory of my mother's repeated threats that she'd drown my father in the septic tank. I drove the two and a half hours from Austin to Beeville, and went to the funeral home first. I wanted to verify my father was dead. Seeing my father, freshly embalmed in his coffin, the nicotine stains scrubbed from his fingernails, his hair shining, and wearing all his favorite gold jewelry, in that

moment, I realized I was no longer a child, and that it was up to me whether I'd keep my parents as ghosts, or let them go.

My mother is still living, a decade later. Almost eighty, she can cause only so much trouble. The woman I was so terrified of as a child is now powerless over me. The truth now is that neither of my parents are monsters anymore. The ghosts I feared don't have the control over me I thought. There's my epiphany. After the drama is over, after the dénouement, we are left to make our own monsters. Or not.

Later in life, I've come to accept myself as a writer. In my forties, I've had time to process my childhood through significant amounts of therapy and self-medication, learned to love myself, as well as others, and have distance from my past, my childhood, those ghosts, that aren't really ghosts, just glimmers, stray sparks in the campfire of my memory. I've stopped trying to prove myself right or wrong and learned to accept most days. And through that acceptance, I continue to write and share and stopped trying to control my readers. I can let them make their own judgments as to whether what I write is true, because what the answer really is: does it matter?

Redemption

Early in my graduate degree, I read Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* for the first time as an adult. In the introduction Vonnegut writes,

And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back and I love her for that, because it was so human...

This one [book] is a failure, and had to be, since it was written by a pillar of salt
(Vonnegut 22).

In my final MFA class, Politics of Narration, I reread *Slaughterhouse-Five*. After several years of coursework, I finally grasped the significance of what Vonnegut wrote. Fear of failure and aiming for an unattainable perfection has stopped me a million times over. It was time to accept myself. I could be a pillar of salt and allow myself to write. I could be truthful with myself and experiment in my prose.

I've told you what is in my thesis, but what *isn't* has worth as well. What isn't included? My father's speediness at crossword puzzles, his talent for playing the harmonica, his love of jokes, and any hint of his talent for teaching household pets to jump through hoops like circus animals. I've omitted my mother's many artistic gifts, her ability to create miracles in the garden, her sheer determination to survive in the manner she set forth, and her constant assertion that she's lived a life without regrets. I've excluded anything more than brief flashes of my beloved sister, who I grew close to an adult, and I only hint of the immense love I've experienced and wonderful son. I've left out almost as much as I've put in and in many ways, this is what revision is about.

I have learned many lessons on style, technique, theory and form throughout the course of my studies, but I'm most grateful for learning to embrace the creative process, as well as the revisions. The joy of creativity is what is important, not the end product. What is left after writing, after the writer sets down her pen, or closes her laptop, is only the reader's interpretation and reality.

I did grow up in the presence of ghosts, whose words held far more value than mine. Sometimes, I still listen for them. It's hard to break the habit of being haunted, once you grow accustomed to dreading rebuke from monsters. "Everything is punished by your absence" writes

poet Li-Young Lee in his book, “In the City Which I Love You” (Lee 55). Now when I’m reminded of my ghosts, I write like hell.

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Mother of Three Drowns Children

Rubbery canned peaches pooled on the tiled kitchen countertop. My cat sat on top of the fridge, licking yellow-colored cake mix from his front paw. I checked my watch and debated scooping the fruit up with both hands and dumping it into an aluminum pan, but black and silver tabby hair mingled with the orange blobs. As I glared at Mr. Whiskers, oblivious to the mess he'd made, I realized my plans to bring cobbler to the funeral reception had changed. I'd be the one toting a grocery-store angel food cake and a pint of barely-washed blackberries to the wake, again. But it would be okay. Grieving families will eat just about anything.

After losing my mother, husband and brother in six months' time, I knew I never wanted to see a plate of turkey tetrazzini again. There were still two giant tubs of it in the deep freeze. Why Liz Milford always brought that spaghetti casserole to everyone's wake, I'll never know. She'd swoop in like a game show hostess, presenting the hot dish like a goddamn trophy. If Liz didn't have stock in Campbell's Cream of Mushroom soup, she must have had it in Pyrex. She doled out those 9 x 13's like they were paper plates.

Whatever her reasons, Liz would be bringing her signature dish for the Marshall's funeral today, like she did for every funeral, and I'd be bringing something from the corner store. It was the best I could do, what with the cat. Anyway, I knew I can't control what the other women in the First Methodist Funeral Refreshment Committee women were going to think about me. You can't control anything in life, but I'd tried.

How can I explain that in my youth, I wanted to be a stereotype? My home life was nothing like classic television shows. We didn't eat at the table, Mom was always drunk, and the house filthy. Since my family wasn't like the Brady Bunch, I decided when I grew up it would

be. I'd mapped out my own life at sixteen, and thought I was on the right path—engaged to Liz's older brother, Tommy. He was president of the sophomore class and already on the varsity football team. He'd be a big shot someday and he was mine.

In the fall of our senior year at Jefferson High, I made my push to set a wedding date. "Tommy, let's get married in June, okay?" I said. "We'll be like Ward and June Cleaver from *Leave it to Beaver*," I said. Tommy didn't look up from his copy of *Beowulf*. "Tommy, we should have three kids, two years apart: Tommy, Jr., Amanda May and Roy."

Tommy put the paperback down and yawned, stretching his muscular arms back behind his head, "Seriously? You've already named our children?"

"Of course," I said. "We'll buy the blue and white house on the corner of Washington and Garfield, you know, the one by the post office?"

"How'll we afford that?" Tommy looked at his black rubber digital watch, before running his hand through his sandy-colored hair. "It's not the 1950's," he said.

"Daddy says you can work with him at McDade Brothers Plumbing, and I'll stay home with the kiddos," I said. "I'll make sure the house is immaculate and that there is fresh squeezed lemonade and chocolate cake ready for you when you get home," I said.

Tommy sighed and picked up his book, "I don't want to work for your father or have a bunch of kids, and I really don't want to stay here in this crap town for the rest of my life. I want to go to Texas Tech."

"Texas Tech? That's a million miles away. Why would you want to do that?"

"I want to be an environmental lawyer," said Tommy. "Sure I want to marry you, but you'll need to find some work while we're in Lubbock. Hey, you could get a job at a grocery store so we'd have a food discount."

At eighteen, nothing about a food discount sounded romantic to me, and I'd watched plenty episodes of *General Hospital*. I knew where this was heading: Me, working endless hours as a cashier at Wal-Mart, just to pay the rent on a one-room efficiency apartment in Lubbock with walls painted the same color green as a hospital. We'd be forced to eat dollar menu items from the Whataburger, because I'd be too whipped from standing all day to cook, and I'd end up fat, with bad skin.

But Tommy, why he'd graduate third in his class and luck into a job at a prestigious Dallas firm, in a big high rise downtown. He'd don a pair of fancy pearl-colored ostrich leather boots, to prop up on his big oak desk. And for his first act as an attorney, he'd write our divorce papers. I'd see him from time to time, with the newer, younger Mrs. Milford. She'd have dyed red hair that she'd wear up in a chignon while he drove her around in a black Austin-Healey convertible, all while I worked the night shift at the 7-11 for a 10% discount on Twinkies.

Seeing my future so clearly, practically spelled out in the bottom of my Coca-Cola Slurpee, I decided to take control, the best I knew how.

I stopped taking the pill.

Eight weeks later, I claimed to be the one in those 1-in-10,000 birth control pill failures. I dabbed a Kleenex carefully around my eyes, trying not to smear my mascara, while Tommy said nothing. I wanted him to tell me it was great news, to reassure me we'd make it work.

"This baby is going to look just like you," I said. "He'll be blonde, tall and broad-shouldered. I bet he'll even have your unusually big pinkie toe." Tommy sat motionless at the steering wheel, his eyes down. "It will be great. You can work with my Dad, remember." I kept apologizing and making excuses, like I'd burned the toast, or a hole in his shirt with an iron. But Tommy stayed silent. The burning hole was in his heart. He didn't say a word, didn't even look

at me. The silence was so awkward that I'd have preferred he hit me, or at least called me names. Instead, he started his baby blue Ford truck and drove me back to my parent's split-level house. He didn't kiss me, didn't say goodbye, and didn't even open my door.

I stood outside his truck, waving briefly before blowing him a kiss, but he looked straight through me, down Adam Street, towards the Dairy Queen, towards Highway 59 out of town. I thought of our first kiss, us shuffling from side to side at the seventh grade Valentine's dance, our sweaty hands locked. I didn't see the kiss coming, and turned my head. Tommy's kiss landed close to my ear, his mouth filled with my Aqua Net-saturated hair. I kissed him back on his chapped lips, which tasted like Big Red soda. He pulled me close, and he smelled warm and dusty, like a caliche road. We'd been a couple ever since.

Tommy drove back to his home that night, kissed his mother goodnight, and put on his football uniform. He covered his face with the pillow from his bed, and shot himself, in the back of his bedroom closet. Before the EMTs came, his mother and sister Liz cleaned up the bloody feathers. As the EMTs attempted CPR, his mother wailed and Liz wailed. They continued to cry as the medical workers loaded him up and took him to the hospital. But Tommy Milford was dead long before the attending physician signed the official form. Dead, before he even dropped me off and headed straight for his Dad's gun cabinet. I wish I'd realized how much he wanted to live in Lubbock.

I remember a peach pie, hot with a buttery hand-rolled crust, the day of Tommy's funeral. I think it was Mrs. Aclair, the high school librarian, who had brought the dessert, along with some hand-churned vanilla ice cream. The pie's syrup was still boiling from the oven and

so hot it burned the tip of my tongue. She'd kept it warm—wrapped it in a baby blanket, cradled it in a shallow Styrofoam cooler. Mrs. Aclair is dead now, too—losing a long battle with lung cancer, if I recall. She'd made a mean pie that morning.

My father sat me down soon after Tommy was buried. “I think you need to move, maybe go to college,” said Dad. “Your mother's tired of you moping around the house.” I agreed, tired from dodging the Milford's around town—afraid they'd discover my secret and blame me for Tommy's death. My father decided to send me to Austin and signed me up for college, not knowing I was pregnant.

I lived in a little efficiency apartment, in a small complex near the campus. The walls were a pale ivory and I hung posters of kittens dangling from tree limbs, with motivational thought bubbles that said, “Hang in there!” The kitchen sink window overlooked a tree-filled courtyard. I felt like an adult, vomiting up Oreo cookies and Doritos in the morning, while spending my afternoons watching *Brady Bunch* reruns. At night, I spent time hiding under my quilts, missing the life I'd imagined as Mrs. Tommy Milford.

The fall semester began and I crossed campus with a stomach swollen, as if I'd swallowed a beach ball. I wore my jeans slung low, with the top button undone, my T-shirts untucked. I waddled through the semester, trying to make friends, but no one wanted to be associated with the pregnant girl. I knew I couldn't go home, so I tried to make the best of it. I reminded myself each night I wouldn't be alone for much longer. Soon I'd have little Tommy, Jr. to play with and love.

Being young, not going to the doctor, not eating right, I didn't know when I was going to have the baby. I imagined someone was squatting in a field of beans, having her baby, and letting

it suckle as she went back to picking the crops, and I assumed I could give birth, too. And one morning, when I woke up in a foul-smelling puddle tinged, I knew it was time. I called a cab and walked through the automatic doors at the county hospital emergency room. The admissions clerk took one look at me and pointed towards a lime-colored chair.

I wasn't afraid of having a baby. I guess I was too young, too stupid. I should've been terrified, but I wasn't. One nurse looked between my legs as another helped me into a green and blue dotted hospital gown, while still another gave me a shot of something and helped me move onto another narrow gurney, this one with a soft yellow blanket. A short while later, an older nurse, came in and patted me on the head. "You'll be having your baby very soon," she said. "Do you have any questions?"

I asked, "Isn't this supposed to hurt more?"

Three hours later, I was surprised by a daughter. The baby was not Tommy, Jr. and I was sure there'd been a mistake. Without an ultrasound or even a single prenatal vitamin, I shouldn't have had an expectation of the baby's sex, but I did. I found this a clear sign from the universe that I didn't possess an ounce of mother's intuition.

The baby, bald and pink, was much smaller than I expected a baby to be. The first infant I'd ever held, she was fragile, translucent like a white porcelain tea cup. Everything seemed to come into focus, to sharpen, when the nurse put her on my chest. Six and a half pounds felt immense, heavy. Every inch of the recovery roomed filled with her father's silence.

The nurse I saw before I gave birth returned to my hospital room to teach me some basic skills—diapering and breastfeeding—while a younger nurse with a slight limp took the infant to the nursery. The older nurse saw me and frowned. "Do you want me to call someone for you?" she asked. I thought about giving her my parent's number, to let her inform them I'd been

secretly pregnant and had a baby. But this was something between me and poor, dead Tommy. I shook my head and she nodded her head in reply.

After spending ten minutes showing me how to change a fake wet diaper on a fake plastic baby, she asked if I had any questions. I had a million questions, but only one mattered. “Where should I take the baby, to be adopted?”

The nurse’s eyes softened and she smiled. “I’ll go get the social worker, Sweetie,” she said.

In twenty minutes, I’d signed a stack of paper work was signed and I knew I’d never see my baby again. Another ten hour shift passed, and another nurse wrote her name in large letters on the whiteboard by the side of my hospital bed. Her name was Angie, with a big round dot over the “i.” Angie put a large sanitary napkin into the panties I’d worn into the hospital. She told me to sit up, and slipped them on my body, up my thighs and over my hips. I felt like that plastic doll, I’d diapered hours before. My underwear felt too big now, despite the empty flesh sagging around my navel.

I left the hospital less than twenty-four hours after I went in, my breasts thick, throbbing and feverish. Milk seeped through my sweater, leaving two dark spots on my chest. It was a terrible ache, one I didn’t know to expect. The nurse said I might feel “blue” for a few days, but both breasts were radiating heat and all I knew to do was to stick one of the giant foot-long sanitary napkins they had given me boxes of, into my bra. I was leaking, bleeding.

I didn’t know how much liquid I would lose. How I’d fill a creek with all that milk and blood. How now I knew, what it meant, to be a woman.

Six weeks later, my uterus back to its original size, my breasts dry, I met Paul Ranger. In

the last semester of college I ever attended, he saw me in the undergraduate library staring out the window, watching pigeons fight for territory on the third-floor ledge. Dusting something invisible off his red plaid shirt, Paul looked past my shoulder, towards the pigeons and asked, “Do you know what time it is?” I was relieved a man was talking to me, that anyone was acknowledging me.

“It’s a good time for dinner,” I said.

Over the next few weeks I fell in love with Paul, or at least the idea of Paul. He had dark curly hair, wore thick glasses and white socks with all his shoes. He wasn’t going to be an attorney and didn’t believe in divorce. “I’m studying biology,” he said, while we ate hot fudge sundaes at Denny’s on our sixth date. “I want to teach at a high school in a small town. I want two or three children and we’ll go on nature walks as a family.” Paul wanted the things I’d wanted with Tommy. Paul’s fantasies reminded me of my own.

After six months I began to feel a little less empty and when Paul asked me to marry him, on bended knee in front of the Texas Capitol, I said yes. We did couple things, took walks by the park, went to the movies, swam in the pool at the complex, and made love on kitchen cabinets and the living room floor—the skinned spot on my lower back stayed raw, never having the time to form a scab in between long sessions under Paul’s hips.

“Maybe you should reconnect with my family,” said Paul. “So things will be smoothed out when we have our first baby.” He persisted in bringing it up, wanting to meet them, until one night, I gave up. I buried my head in his chest and told him about home, about Tommy, the baby, and the spot I could feel deep inside me. Where the placenta attached, the tender place that woke me up some nights. The spot that still felt raw, more so than the place on my tailbone. Paul cried with me, and assured me it would be okay. He’d make it up to me. We’d have two or three

babies, I'd stay home with them, take them to the park. "I'll be off summers," he said, "and we'll take long vacations to the coast. He believed this, and somewhere, some part of me believed him, too.

I kept taking my birth control pills, never missing a dose. Even after we'd been married, one year, two years, three. When Paul kissed me on the cheek and left to teach his class, I'd wait until the front door shut, and swallow.

I dreamt of my mother, thirty-eight and shocked to discover she was pregnant with me. My siblings in high school, the crib and high chair sold, ten years past. My grandmother said Mother took the news badly, and was downing wine by the bottle, weaving at the top of every set of stairs. When I was born, no one could track down my father, to tell him I'd been born. "Mother not bonding with child," the doctor wrote on my mother's chart, at the foot of her hospital bed. That's the story my grandmother told.

My mother was depressed long after my birth, but no one in the family was concerned that she wasn't eating, that she wasn't sleeping, that she spent hours pacing back in forth between the front door and back door of our house, that she collected the crickets that she caught and smashed on the front step in empty mayonnaise jars under her side of the bed.

When I turned three, my mother filled the kitchen sink with hot, soapy water. For my birthday, she pushed me face down into the basin, again and again. The only sound: splashing. The only sensation: my lungs, burning in my chest.

"Baptizing," she called it, when the next door neighbor intervened. Thank God, Mrs. Saliz was out of vanilla.

Several years into my marriage with Paul, what I thought was the flu, turned out to be another pregnancy. I bit my lip, until it bled, red drops running down my chin, realizing this time I was a failed birth control statistic. I wasn't sure whether to blame it on the antibiotics I'd been taking for a sinus infection, or bad karma. Paul found me in the bathroom, standing in a tank top and pajama bottoms, clutching the pregnancy test in my hand. Elated, Paul collapsed at my feet on the fuzzy bath mat in front of the toilet. He grasped me by my legs, hollering with joy.

I tried to warm to the idea of a baby I could keep, a baby I wanted for the right reasons. I was old enough now to be a parent, and we lived in a trendy neighborhood and had nice furniture. At barely six weeks pregnant, and before we could even discuss the situation, Paul told everyone in his family. His sister was already planning a baby shower before he hung up the phone. He thought he was going to be a father, the father of two children who loved and respected the wilderness, like him.

I was against being pregnant and having a child at first, but as the weeks past, I grew excited. Paul brought me home a bouquet of flowers one day, chocolate the next, and had already hired a maid to help around the house. Ten weeks passed, eleven weeks, twelve. As the days went by, I begin to think, "Maybe I can be a mother."

Maybe I could love something that came from me. That came from my body.

But just as I felt myself settling—on the very day I'd decided I *could* take a peek at nursery furniture for the first time—I took an afternoon nap and had a terrible nightmare. I dreamt that Eleanor Roosevelt stood over my bed and demanded I have an abortion. She kept mumbling that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" bullshit and was brandishing a gun. No sooner did she tell me the third time that it was crucial I have an abortion, she was gone, back into the ether, wherever dead president's wives go. I woke up in a cold sweat and pulled the

Yellow Pages from under the nightstand, looked under the “A’s” and started making phone calls. I was going crazy, and didn’t care.

Two days later, I was on my back, my feet in silver stirrups that were covered with black and green shamrock-covered socks. When the doctor dilated my cervix and the vacuum began to roar like a Shop Vac, I cried. The nurse held my hand, and as quietly as she could talk over the roar of the machine, she reassured me, “Everything will be fine, Sweetie. In nine more minutes, it will be all over.”

I continued to cry. Not for me, not for the baby, but for Paul. He had taken a group of his school kids on a marine biology adventure down at the Gulf Coast and he wouldn’t know for another two days that I wasn’t pregnant anymore. I cried because I knew I’d tell him I’d had a miscarriage, and that he’d take off his glasses and cry, certain to tell me in between deep sobs that it wasn’t my fault.

But it was my fault.

And I didn’t deserve his sympathy, because pregnancy made me crazy. I didn’t deserve his sympathy for feeling so normal again, as soon as I wasn’t pregnant anymore.

Paul grew more distant after that, and the day I woke up and finally felt ready to give him his first child, he sipped his morning coffee and before it cooled said, “I’m leaving you.”

“I don’t blame you,” was all I said, clearing the breakfast dishes. I kissed him on his cheek, went to the bathroom to throw up my eggs, and never told him I was almost three months pregnant.

I have empathy, or misplaced fondness, for those women you read about, the ones on television, who murder their children and afterwards have no explanation *why*. Their hormones

gone haywire, their motherly feelings of love mired with bitter hatred, self-loathing and fear. Maybe something was wrong with their serotonin levels, their dopamine levels.

I was one of those women. I knew it in my heart, in my womb. I was the type of woman who slowly unravels while others watch—husbands and family members too preoccupied with the new baby to notice just how close the mother stands to the precipice, suffocated by baby powder and teddy bear-covered blankets.

I worked through my pregnancy, took myself to all the appointments, and drove myself to the hospital when it was time. But when I was finally ready for my baby, he was already dead. There was no heartbeat, the umbilical cord wrapped around the baby boy's tiny neck. I hadn't noticed he hadn't been moving the last few days, so preoccupied with painting the nursery the perfect shade of navy.

After I pushed his little blue body out of my body into the quiet delivery room, the doctor left and the nurses lowered the lights. One of the staff wrapped him in a striped blanket and put him in my arms. He was cold and wrinkled and I felt like I was viewing his body from the bottom of a swimming pool. The nurses moved me to a new bed, before taking him from my arms. I was shaking even though I felt warm.

"Wait, can I name him?" I asked the nurse holding the baby I'd wanted and wouldn't get to keep. She nodded, her eyes wet. "Thomas, please. Can you put Thomas Milford, Jr. on the paperwork?"

The Marshall's funeral service was at 1 p.m. I made it to the grocery store and back, making it to their house in record time, by 12:45. Our committee tidied the house and sat out

refreshments on the dining room table while the family tried to keep a brave face at the graveside service. Since it was their three children being buried, I knew there'd be a crowd. I bought two angel food cakes, a carton of fresh strawberries and a giant tub of Cool-Whip, since the canned peaches were still stuck to my countertops. It was an inconvenience I'd be forced to deal with later.

The Marshalls arrived a few moments before the other funeral attendees and prepared to receive all the condolences they didn't want. Mrs. Marshall looked five years older than when I saw her at Wal-Mart last week, her shopping cart filled with plastic cups and colored paper napkins for the oldest boy's birthday. Today she'd pulled her hair back, into a ponytail. She probably hadn't bathed in days.

Everyone in town had been talking about the accident. Mrs. Marshall had another one of her bad headaches and took a sedative. She pushed the children out the front door. "Don't come back until your father gets home, you hear me! I don't want to hear another peep out of any of you. I'll make you sorry if you do," said their mother. She didn't hear the thunderstorm rolling in or know the three boys were playing in the dry creek bed. She wasn't aware of the dangers of flash floods. Worse, Patsy Marshall didn't know her last words to her children would be a threat. You could see the shame, burning in Mr. Marshall's eyes.

Patsy Marshall loosened her pony tail and rubbed the back of her neck as she thanked each of us for the refreshments. She was actually one of our own, a funeral hostess committee member—the youngest member, in fact. She'd always brought cupcakes, covered with multi-colored sprinkles to funerals, too festive for the situation at hand. The blue and yellow frosting and the metallic pink and purple paper always stood out on the refreshment table.

After her children's funeral, she brought baskets of dinner rolls to bereaved families, or trays of chopped up vegetables and ranch dip.

Mrs. Marshall collapsed into the closest dining room chair, its wooden legs wobbling like her own beneath her, just as Liz Milford walked in, wearing potholders with a green ivy print that matched her suit. She set down another dish of tetrazzini before patting Mr. Marshall on the wrist, and giving Patsy Marshall a polite hug. Then she joined the rest of us in the kitchen, tucking the potholders in her green leather purse. She nudged me, and with her voice lowered said, "This reminds me of my brother's funeral—our poor Tommy."

"There were more people at Tommy's funeral," I said absent-mindedly. Liz turned to face me, nodded and smiled, her teeth clinched to hold back tears.

"That's true, isn't it? Everyone loved Tommy."

"I've never loved anyone else like him, Liz," I said. "I know I was married to Paul for fifteen some years, but I never loved him like Tommy. No one was like Tommy." I blushed, ashamed how much Tommy's death still hurt me. Paul was a good husband, filled all of my eighteen-year-old school girl dreams—with the exception of the two boys and a girl. "Tommy was so young," I said, a lump swelling in my throat.

"I know, we were all young" said Liz, patting me, like she'd just patted Mr. Marshall. "It's such a shame you didn't get to marry him, didn't have any babies. He's the last of the Milford's, you know, no one to carry on the family name, now," she said. "Look at us," she said, trying to smile, "two old maids, and childless to boot. We're the last of our kind, too. God's will." Adjusting her collar, she looked at the group of red-eyed guests gathering around the dining table. "I'd better go stir the casseroles," she said, as she walked out of the kitchen.

I thought about calling after her, to tell her how I'd tried my best at eighteen to get pregnant with a Tommy, Jr., how there *was* a Tommy, Jr., even if the baby hadn't been his—and never took a breath. I thought of how when I told Tommy I was pregnant, he never said another word. His last words to me, to anyone, were, “Want to go make out?” I clinched my eyes shut and tried hard to imagine Tommy and Tommy, Jr. playing football in Heaven, so I wouldn't bust out crying at the Marshall's wake.

I'd killed Liz Milford's only brother, the heir apparent to the family name. I didn't tell Liz that I'd tucked an apology note into the maroon letterman jacket he was buried in. I'd failed him again by having a girl, by not being able to take care of her. I'd never successfully had another child, because I was unable to love anyone more than I loved the empty space he'd created inside me, where his daughter had been for those brief nine months, out of my entire life.

Instead, I went and picked up the empty plastic cups accumulating on the coffee tables, soaking the serving spoons in the sink, and helping the other women organize the freezer to make room for all the leftovers the Marshall's wouldn't want to eat. We rustled aluminum foil and plastic wrap as we juggled half-eaten hams and bowls of coleslaw as the Marshall's saw people out their front door, thanking them for coming and looking forward to seeing them next Sunday, in church. I gathered up the barely touched turkey tetrazzini, and watched Liz Milford kissing Patsy Marshall and then Mr. Marshall, on the cheek before she headed out to her car.

And then the rest of us swept and polished and took out the trash. We kept cleaning until Patsy reassured us that everything was okay, even though it never would be again, and we all knew it.

I drove home, preparing to clean up the peach cobbler that didn't happen. The cat, oblivious to the mess he'd made, yowled for his supper when I walked in the door. Setting down my purse, I patted him on the head before opening a tin of salmon-colored meat and dumping it in his bowl. With the cat distracted, I turned back to the disaster from this morning—the cake mix turned to thick glue that would require scraping with a spatula to remove it from the counter, the peaches were now brown. I poked one with the tip of my fingernail, half expecting it to burst, before sliding them into the baking pan, which I used to transfer the contents into the garbage outside.

I considered driving to Sam's BBQ, where they sold pints of banana pudding and cobbler. Maybe they'd have a cherry one that I could warm in the microwave and top with ice cream from the freezer.

It was good not to have anyone but yourself to worry about. It had been a long day, and I could take a nap now and pick up some cobbler later, or tomorrow, any day for that matter.

The Marshall boys' mother had laid out her three children, like freshly washed socks, wrung out from the washtub. She put them in a line, like a litter of wet puppies. Her head had finally stopped aching.

Poor little drowned babies, just waiting for their father to come home and find them. There wouldn't be any thunderous shrieks from the children, no squeals, "Daddy's home! Daddy's home!"

There was only the father's gasp—and a primal, woeful moan—when he realized what had really happened.

I told you it wasn't just "the blues," said Patsy Marshall, folding towels, fresh from the dryer, "but you wouldn't listen."

Bullets and Bracelets

Yellow stars on tight blue panties. A golden eagle spread between her generous breasts. A boomerang. A lasso at her hip. My God, this woman could deflect bullets with her bracelets! I was six and in love with Wonder Woman, or in love with Lynda Carter as the skimpily dressed crime fighter who battled bad guys each Wednesday night on TV in the late 1970s.

I didn't know why watching her run down the street after Nazis in her red go-go boots made me feel so differently, but I knew there was some sort of connection because I didn't feel like that watching Barney Miller. Wonder Woman made my ears hot, like I was embarrassed. I'd cry if my mother dragged me to the grocery store and made me miss the show.

Sometimes I watched the show with my cousin Rose, a year younger than I was. I studied her to see if she liked watching the show the same way I did. I could tell she enjoyed watching Wonder Woman lasso a man and making him tell the truth, but I knew her reaction was different than mine. She continued to play with her Barbie dolls, while I worried if I'd die from my heart racing. I wanted to be the man wrapped in her golden lasso. I wanted her leaning over me, demanding I tell her the truth. *Yes, I love you! It's the truth, I do!* I imagined what she'd smell like, hovering above me and somehow I knew it wouldn't be a mix of Channel Number 5 and Pledge furniture spray, like my mother.

Rose interrupted my obsessing. "Laura, I'm thirsty. Pour me some grape Kool-Aid."

"Wait for a commercial," I said. "I want to watch Wonder Woman teach that crook a lesson." Rose responded by sticking her bottom lip out so far it almost hit the floor, and then she started to cry.

"Get her a damn drink," yelled my mother. But instead, I balled up my fist and hit Rose smack in the middle of in her scrawny bicep—she wailed.

“Go to your room,” said my mother, shaking her head at me. I slammed my door behind me in blatant defiance. “Fine,” said my mother through the closed door. “If you want to act like a brat you can stay in your room until breakfast.” I curled up under my quilt, and dreamed of ways to punish my mother and Rose for making me miss the end of my favorite show and supper.

I tried to watch reruns of the Wonder Woman show a few years back, but after only fifteen minutes of her jiggling, I’d decided I’d had enough. I’d add Wonder Woman to the list of things that seemed hypnotizing as a young child that didn’t translate well into adulthood. But the few minutes I watched made me realize that the main thing I really loved about the show was Wonder Woman’s ability to transform from the average working woman into a superhero. It gave me hope, even at the age of six, that I might be able to grow up to become a writer and expose mean Sister Anna, who made me hold a bar of ivory soap in my mouth for telling dirty limericks in math class. I’d get boxes of fan mail. “Dear Laura,” my admirers would write, “Sister Anna sounds like a stupid smelly fat idiot. She must be jealous of your beautiful hair and funny jokes. Love, from your adoring fan club.”

In Wonder Woman’s day to day life, when she wasn’t fighting Nazis and master criminals, she was a productive member of the military in a drab, loose fitting uniform. Her hair was up and she wore big round glasses that emphasized her smarts. In later seasons, she was a modern day crime fighter for a CIA-type agency that seemed to specialize in chasing down vigilante skateboarders and surfers to a disco soundtrack. For me, the plot was irrelevant. When the bad guys, (World War II Germans or California teenagers) got up to no good, that beauty Wonder Woman would run to the nearest stairwell and she’d turn in a circle, just like me on the school playground. She’d spin and spin and I’d stop breathing for a few seconds as her hair

would tumble from its bun, her glasses disappeared, and her compelling cleavage defied gravity, filling the T.V. screen and her flashy costume.

This transformation would keep me up at night, in those years before I turned eight. I'd lie in bed, wishing I was lying beside her, very still, after she'd spun herself into her superhero garb. Lying next to her in bed was the best idea I could come up with at that age. As I got a little older, my fantasy evolved. I decided the best option was to be Wonder Woman's boyfriend, the dashing Steve Trevor. One day, on the way to school, I decided to run the idea by my mother. "Mom, I want to be a boy. Can we get me some boy's clothes at Sears, like after school?"

"What did you just say?" My mother hit the brakes, throwing me forward in my seat. She pulled the Ford Pinto onto the road's shoulder, put the car in park, and scowled.

"I was just wondering if I could get some new clothes, you know, like the boys wear?"

"What is the matter with you?" My mother slammed her fist on the dashboard. "Don't you ever bring this up again, never, do you hear me?" I nodded while she fumbled for her pack of Virginia Slims in her purse. "Why do you always have to be so different? Your life would be easier if you weren't always trying to stick out. Nice girls don't act like *that*."

My mother's reaction made it obvious; I needed to stop talking about Wonder Woman all the time, because if I didn't, people would know what was wrong with me, even though I wasn't sure myself. But somehow I knew if I could just keep going, keep spinning, I might be able to transform myself into a normal grown-up who was successful, beautiful and could fight crime. Or at least, I could have a girlfriend who was like that.

"Laura is a dumb fag," yelled Michael Peters as he threw the red rubber dodge ball at my face during sixth-grade recess. The other kids joined him in taunting me. "Dumb fag! Dumb

fag!” The words stung worse than the whack of the dimpled rubber ball on my nose. Even though Michael started teasing someone else the minute I was tagged out, I was horrified by his insight. *Michael Peters knew this terrible thing about me, something I didn't know about myself.* I sat on the tire swing with the two other girls sporting similar red spots on their arms. I dragged my feet back and forth in the dirt in an attempt to look like I didn't care. That it wasn't a big deal that Michael Peters was right, that the reason I'd been fixated on Wonder Woman was that I *was* a dumb fag.

In seventh grade, I had to change out of my school uniform into shorts and a T-Shirt for gym class. St. Vincent's was a small school lacking both a gym and locker rooms, so all the girls crammed into a small restroom with only two stalls. Because there were twelve girls, only the fastest got any privacy for changing. And as much as I wanted to undress in private, I wanted more to see Lorraine Taylor unbutton her yellow uniform blouse.

Twice I stalled Lorraine in the classroom, to make sure she'd be too late to the restroom to change anywhere but beside me, in front of the mirror and sinks. I figured the chance to see her in just her bra was well worth the wrath of Sister Rosario if she noticed how late we were to P.E. “Hey Lorraine, want to look at the new puffy stickers I got?” Lorraine looked over her shoulder to see if any of the nuns were watching. “I got one that is a snail and it has crazy bulgy eyes. You have to see it, right now.”

“I don't know,” said Lorraine. “We might get in trouble. Sister Maria already gave me a check mark for talking during mass this morning.”

“It'll only take a sec,” I pleaded, silently counting the number of girls still gathering their tennis shoes from the cubby. Lorraine fidgeted with her navy knee socks. Sensing her hesitation, I upped the ante, “The snail sticker is scratch and sniff.”

“Really?” Lorraine tilted her head and scrunched up her nose. “What does snail smell like?” Before I could come up with a witty answer, Sister Maria walked up behind us and scolded us for dawdling. The nun grabbed us by our shoulders and pointed us towards the door. “I knew we should’ve hurried. Now we have to stay after school five whole minutes.” I patted Lorraine on the back and began strategizing how I’d get the seat behind her in detention.

I’d replaced my obsession with Wonder Woman with someone much more tangible and age-appropriate: Lorraine. At night I would think of lying on top her, kissing her. I knew from the nuns and my mother that I was going to Hell, but the thought of Lorraine’s freckled nose nestled in my neck made a brimstone-filled future worth the risk. I promised myself I’d say a few extra Hail Mary’s as I slid my hand under my pink-flowered nightie.

Somehow, I knew that one day I’d spin out of my plaid Catholic school uniform and into a life that felt as authentic as those moments in my childhood when I felt invincible, standing in front of my bathroom mirror in my Wonder Woman undershirt and panties, deflecting invisible bullets, when I was really rebounding from the cruelties of bullies like Michael Peters.

“Dirt,” I said whirling around in the school cafeteria line, almost knocking Lorraine’s chocolate milk off her tray. “Snails smell like dirt.”

The Bicycle

My son Jay and I stood in the parking lot and stared at the new Schwinn, a single-speed gear bike with coaster brakes. I tried to talk him into getting a ten speed, but he rolled his eyes at me. “This is the type of bike hipsters ride, Mom” he said, while the salesman winked. Jay had asked for a bike the day before he was due to head back to Texas Tech. He said it would make navigating campus faster, and Jay didn’t ask for much. The last time he’d owned a bike, he was six, a tiny silver and blue BMX bike he’d raced around the cul-de-sac. As I pushed aside the damp hair clinging to my forehead, I wondered what happened to that bike, and why he never wanted another one until now. He was almost twenty-one.

Jay reminded me of his six-year old self, grinning as he rode the bike away from the cash register straight outside. He circled the parking lot twice, and then parked the bike by his used Kia Rio. His smile didn’t last, as we started our unsuccessful struggle to fit the 26-inch frame into his four-door economy car trunk. Even with the backseats down, either a bike wheel or the handlebar hung too far out of the car for it to be safe to drive. “Maybe we should get some string or something,” Jay said.

“I don’t have any rope on hand, do you?” Jay didn’t answer me. My son continued his attempts to force the bike to fit the car. Sweat dripped off his chin as I hovered, trying to move the seats up and down, forward or back, and rolling down the windows. I wasn’t helping. Jay stopped and set the bike back down in the parking lot and put down the kick stand. He coughed, cleared his throat and told me, “I think if I removed the handlebars, it will fit.” It was a question really, a test. He looked right into my eyes, searching for the answer for several seconds before realizing I didn’t have a clue.

“Do the bars even come off?” I asked. “How are they even attached? If you take them off, could you figure out how to put them back on?”

My son turned his back to me while he scratched the damp hair clinging to his neck. He seemed to be examining something in the distance. I felt like an idiot and neither of us knew what sort of tool we needed to take the thing apart. And we didn’t have any tools with us. It was scorching hot and traffic stacked up on the interstate behind us. At that moment, the only tool I wished for was a hammer.

“Let’s ask if anyone in the store can help,” I said. “There must be a man in there who’d know how to fix this. Men know how to do things like this, you know?” His eyes shot back at me in a sideways flash. His sneer reflected off the bike’s chrome finish. He clinched his jaw so tight, if he didn’t have a headache now, he’d have one soon.

“I’m a man,” he said, not turning around. I rubbed my temples and pretended I didn’t hear what he said, or that he’d just raised his voice to me. It was the heat. It wasn’t possible to be pleasant in such oppressive heat. Had I’d given his kiddie bike to charity when tired of it? Maybe he just outgrew it? We’d probably lost it was lost in one of the moves, where we had to leave in the night while my latest boyfriend was passed out on the sofa. I tried to remember what became of that BMX as I adjusted my clammy bra strap.

“Boyd’s Bike closed ten minutes ago,” he said, his voice flat. I reached in my pocket and pulled out my cell phone. Its face was damp from the sweat on my thigh. After five, he was right about the shop’s hours. The neon “open” light was off. I put the phone back into my pocket, and then pulled it out again, wishing there was a husband or boyfriend I could call to fix this. There wasn’t, so I put it in my other pocket for a few minutes before I gave up. I tossed it in the front

seat, up by my son's phone. Fidgeting irritated Jay, and he was already at his limit with me. What was supposed to be a fun send-off experience had grown awkward.

"When I said we needed a man, I just meant we needed someone who knew about bikes," I said. Jay put the bike down again and turned towards me. He was so close I could feel his Doublemint Gum breath on my cheek. For a second, I thought he was going to punch me.

"Don't apologize, Mom." Jay slammed his trunk shut and started rolling up the windows. "You've got to let me be a man. I'm not your little boy anymore."

"I let you be a man, what are you talking about?"

"Mom, I can learn to use tools. I can figure things out for myself. For shit sake, I don't need you folding my underwear and matching my socks. I'm not going to be living at home with you again, not after this break. I have plans to move into an apartment."

"Don't use obscenities, Jay."

Jay pursed his lips and held out his keys, a green plastic shamrock and metal bottle opener clanking against the keys like a wind chime. "Why don't you drive my car back to the house," he said in a calm voice. "You could park it and bring back your car. The bike would easily fit in your SUV. I'll be fine," he said. "Go on. Even with traffic you'll be back in thirty minutes." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Just go to the right, make the U-turn under the interstate and when you see the exit for 51st, take it and head west. You'll recognize things from there."

I felt lighter at once in the air conditioned car, speeding away from the shiny new bike. I concentrated, making the turns toward home, letting my mind wander back to my son, his first bike, blue, for the most part—not red like the new one. Was that the bike his father ran over

when he was drunk? Or the one that guy from next door—the one I’d had the affair with—maybe he’d given it to his own son? There must’ve been some reason I’d forgotten about that bike. Like I’d forgotten my little boy was a man now, over six feet tall. How despite few positive male role models, he’d become a good man. He just didn’t know how to disassemble a bike. And why would he? I never taught him that. I managed to teach him to ride a bike, to change a car tire, to hold open doors for women. But other acts of manhood he’d had to struggle to learn on his own. I switched the air to a lower level and fixed my hair in the review mirror as I made the turn into the Pemberton subdivision. I reached for my purse and phone, and realized my son’s phone was still beside mine. I tossed them both in my bag as I looked for the keys to my car.

When I returned to the store’s parking lot, it was empty—Jay and his bike were gone. I parked the car and reached for my phone, just as I remembered that I had his. I reminded myself he was a grown man. He’d probably decided to ride the bike home. He didn’t have a way to call. I waited for five minutes, ten, before heading home. I made two wrong turns, the setting sun in my eyes, no matter which direction I looked.

When I opened the garage door, Jay’s new bike was there, parked by the old blue BMX. My son sat on the couch by a Grey Goose vodka box from the liquor store. It was filled with plastic cups from Rudy’s BBQ, purple melamine plates, mismatched cutlery, and a greasy toaster. Drinking lemonade from the carton, his feet propped on a teal Rubbermaid container filled with his bedding and socks. “What took you so long?” he asked, “And what’s the plan for dinner?”

Length of Stay: Transient

I stand in line for twenty minutes at the Texas Department of Vital Records, my lower back aching. A clerk, wearing all black with pale skin and heavy makeup eyeballs the clock on the wall—without trying to act like she isn't—then calls out for number ninety-seven, an older man in a purple three-piece suit who mumbles so much, I'm unable understand him. Five minutes later, the clerk calls out ninety-eight and I hand over my filled-in form, pay my seven bucks and wait for my printout.

I head back to my Mazda parked in the lot out front, plop into hot cloth seats and crank the air up. I'm clutching a black and white copy of my brother's original death certificate from 1971, the government's proof of Bill's existence. I want to examine it, but it is hard to focus my eyes in the glaring August afternoon light. I dig in my purse for dark sunglasses while sweat—or is it tears?—drip down my chin.

My mother is the only one who ever talks about the accident, with prompting or without. But I suspect her version of the event is skewed because her son's death is the defining moment of her life, marking the instant when everything changed in the worst possible way, the moment she can blame for all that went wrong: her husband consuming more and more beer, their fights growing more combative, and her surviving children, left to fend for themselves. She loves to look at the ceiling and say, "His death made me lose my mind." But my grandparents, her parents, said it just made her more like herself.

Bill died in a car wreck on a Sunday evening in December 1971, in Beeville, Texas, just two weeks before Christmas, a month shy of my first birthday. My parents returned holiday presents to help pay for his burial, a grim expense they'd never planned. My mother said, "Do you know the only casket we could afford was salmon-colored? That's pink! My own son, buried

forever in a cheap pink coffin—but it was the best we could manage,” she said. “I wish he hadn’t cut off all of his beautiful hair the week before he died.” Little details were important to my mother.

My brother has been dead longer than he was ever alive. Soon, he’ll have been the same age as our father when he died. Our father. Dad wouldn’t talk about the accident, not to me or anyone. If Bill’s name came up, or even something that reminded him of Bill, like hearing someone signing “You are my Sunshine,” my father would leave the room.

My parents buried Bill on a Tuesday. I was there, in diapers, a small bow stuck to the top of my still mostly bald head. I’ve seen the photograph, and I wonder why someone took it on such an occasion, a grainy black and white version of my mother dressed in a plain dark suit, her lips pressed together so tightly her mouth disappeared altogether. Standing outside the Oakwood Cemetery gates, she looks away from the camera, her arms limp, her shoulders low, she holds me, like I am something inanimate, like her purse, or maybe a ham from the butcher’s.

My mother looks as if she is waiting for the first opportunity to put me down or her first chance to get away. Her own mother, the one who told her she’d better not cry or make a scene at the funeral, stands in the background, on the other side of the gates in a light-colored winter coat. She is waving to someone I can’t see, I only know that it isn’t my father. Mother said, “Your dad never really took the time to grieve.” He was back at his shift at the *Beeville Picayune* newspaper that afternoon, before the backhoe finished filling in my brother’s grave. Since my grandfather, father and two uncles all worked at the newspaper, there wasn’t a report about the crash, out of respect for the family.

For months, after my brother died, my mother insists I’d cry whenever we drove past Galloway’s Funeral Home. On the way to the grocery store and my grandparent’s home, it was

difficult to avoid. Each time, I threw a tantrum, begging to go see my brother. That's how she tells it, anyway. But I don't remember and must rely on her for these details from my childhood, details which made it easier for my mother to despise me. As I grew older, I could see it in her eyes. She'd shake her head at me and say, "I could've killed myself after Bill died, and I would've, but somebody had to take care of you. Your father certainly wasn't going to do it."

My sister rode in the car with my brother when it happened. Just fourteen in photographs before the accident, she reminds me of Marsha Brady, with dark blonde, ironed-flat hair and the confident smile of a beauty queen. Photos after Bill's death whisper the hint of her only physical injury from the crash, a broken nose never set—a tiny bump in the center of her face that says more than she ever will. I often wish I had the nerve to question her to find out the details my mother doesn't know, but I can't bear to ask her. Her eyes are so similar to that photo of our mother's in that photo taken outside the cemetery, dark brown and constantly watching for exit signs.

Two other passengers rode in the car with my brother and sister, but I don't know who. I only know that another boy and girl sat in the back seat and that they weren't hurt, at least not in a way that showed. I'll only ever know what my mother called the other boy and girl "lucky." "They walked away without a scratch", she'd say. She hated them for living, too.

"Your brother and his friends were out on a drive to look at Christmas lights," said my mother. At their age, I suspect they were out looking for more than that. I'd love to know where they were going. But I guess it doesn't matter because whatever plans they had were cut short. That night, the local sheriff's deputy stopped his patrol car in the middle of Farm to Market 1349, a rural road off of Highway 59, just fifteen miles from our house. He turned off his car and parked behind the game warden, who had called for help to pull a twenty-point buck from out of

the road. Neither vehicle had its lights on, and without any street lights, there was little visibility. Since the two men were standing in front of their cars, my brother couldn't see their flash lights, and drove smack into the back of the deputy's parked car.

I was six when my mother told me her version of the details, my brother driving his red 1967 VW Beetle, a vehicle referred to now as "Hitler's Revenge" on classic car websites. One of the last models before Volkswagen added collapsible steering columns and Department of Transportation approved headlights, thanks in part to Ralph Nadar's *Unsafe at any Speed*. Even though my brother was driving just twenty five miles per hour, he died on impact. "He was impaled—killed instantly," said my mother, pointing to the center of her chest. The VW was towed away from the accident scene and never claimed by my parents from the impound yard. After that, my family only bought Fords.

As I grew older, I thought more about my sister Lisa, absent in most of my mother's accounts of the accident. It is difficult for me to think about her in that instant, sitting in the front seat with our dead brother, his chest impaled on the steering wheel.

Was she conscious? Did she realize what had happened? I tried to ask her once, when she'd flown in from California for our grandfather's funeral. On the drive from the airport I tried to strike up a conversation. "Did Bill and Granddaddy get along?" I asked.

She cracked the window and lit a cigarette. I assumed she didn't hear me and repeated my question. Exhaling a long stream of smoke and she leaned back in her seat and nudged me. "Don't tell Mother I'm smoking again, okay? I told her I quit."

I've never heard anyone speak about Bill like he was ever alive, only as someone dead. I yearn to know what my brother was really like, but no one would ever answer my questions.

What was his favorite meal? What was his laugh like? I wonder what sort of boy he was and wish for details that would make him real to me. A genuine brother. Someone who loved me. I wish his life was defined by something more than just an accident, which no one wants to discuss, or a terrible event that happened to our mother.

The night that Bill died, my grandfather and uncle drove over to our house and gathered brush in the dark to make a large bonfire, which they proceeded to stoke with all of my newly dead brother's belongings. My mother, not knowing what else to do, hid his beloved guitar under her side of the bed, while the two men carted box after box of Bill's things outside and tossed them into the flames. My mother explains their actions were "out of kindness." They didn't want the family to be reminded of him, of the tragedy, by looking at all of Bill's clothes, his books, his paintings.

Where was our father? Since my mother says she can't remember, I assume this means he was passed out drunk during the blaze. I don't know where my sister Lisa was, either. I only know that all that remains of my brother's existence is his bronze grave marker, a few dozen photographs, and that acoustic Gibson guitar.

I've created dozens of possible mythologies and conspiracy theories for my brother, for his existence, for mine. My mother holds the rights to the made-for-TV movie, the authorized biography, and there is no one left who will challenge or dispute her history. But I try to fill in the blanks. My favorite fantasy is that Bill was really my father, and my true mother, the nameless teenage girl in the wreck. So bereft with the loss of her beloved, she handed me over to the family who raised me, while she in turn dropped out of high school and moved to San Francisco. Someday, she'll contact me. She'll have heard I have a child. She'll want to meet her

grandson.

A close second is that Bill didn't really die. Instead, deeply patriotic, he enlisted and went to Vietnam against our mother's wishes. My mother, unlike the other mothers in town, loved to say she'd move us all to Canada if her son was drafted. But what if he wanted to serve his country? My mother would've disowned him. His refusing to be a conscientious objector would have ensured she'd be forced to tell everyone he'd died.

My mother has her own fantasies, but none have a happy ending where Bill lives. His death is too much a part of her identity now. She portrays Bill as completely night blind, undiagnosed since he'd been licensed for only four months. He had little experience driving at night. This mention of inexperience reminds me again that he was only a teenager, a sixteen-year old-child, and was probably blaring George Harrison's "Joy to the World," Isaac Hayes' "Theme from Shaft," or Carole King's "It's Too Late." Did someone shout, "Look out!" but my brother couldn't hear over the music? Was he drunk, like our father?

It's easier to invent a thousand reasons how or why it could have happened, and so much harder to just accept that it did. Four teenagers went out for a ride and only three came back.

I've romanticized my brother, almost as much as I've hated him. He was dead long before his life could go to shit. For him there were no unfiled tax returns, no messy divorces, no bad habits, no middle-age spread. Death ensured he'd always be our mother's favorite, even if she portrayed his death as ruining her life.

Since my mother blamed Bill's accidental death for everything, I learned at a young age to blame him, too. The family stopped eating meals at the table, because his empty seat made them too sad. It was easy to wonder what life would've been like if he hadn't died so suddenly

that winter. If that seat wasn't empty, would my father stop drinking, and my mother stop belittling? Would my sister marry for love instead of security? Would I be the first woman president? These are "ifs" which unlikely, can never be answered certainly. I'll never know what might've been. I'll never know him. But unlike our Mother, I've learned to forgive him for dying.

My car cools down and my eyes adjust in the air-conditioned air. I prop the paper on my steering wheel and scan the death certificate for details new to me. Dr. Reagan, the attending physician who signed my brother's death certificate at 7:30 p.m., was the same doctor who'd delivered me eleven months earlier, and Bill, sixteen years before. What a slap that must've been to my mother. Me, taking my first steps with only a tuft of hair on my head, and my brother, going out of this world the same way, bald—in the hands of the same man who'd birthed us both.

The time of accident is listed as 6:50 p.m. How long those forty minutes must've seemed, between my brother's dying and the doctor's declaring him dead. Where were my sister and their friends? Did the deputy drive them home? Did my terribly squeamish sister ride with our brother's body to the hospital?

Several years ago, I sat in the hospital waiting room while my sister had a hysterectomy. Her doctor came out to tell me that the surgery went well, but my sister was a terrible mess in the recovery room. Sedated, she screamed and demanded repeatedly that the nurses give her back her brother. They had to restrain her for her own safety, until the anesthesia wore off completely. Dr. Jones asked me if I knew why she'd react in such a way, and I told her I could only assume it was from her being with our brother when he died all those years ago.

Back in her hospital room, the doctor told my sister how sorry she was to learn she'd suffered such a harrowing childhood event. Despite heavy pain medications and abdominal stitches, my sister waited until the doctor left the room and then worked up the energy to hiss at me, "You had no right to tell the doctor any of that. We aren't ever going to discuss that, do you hear?"

Multiple boxes, checked with smudgy carbon typewriter "x's," neatly categorize my brother's brief life: White. Male. Accident. Student. Never married. DOA at Memorial Hospital. Injuries sustained in automobile accident. Under informant, it lists our father. I look across the parking lot at the state workers filing out for the day, and realize that "informant" means our father had to identify Bill's body. His first born son. I imagine the memory my father tried to drink away the rest of his life: my brother's lifeless body sprawled on a cold stainless examining table, harsh fluorescent lights, face battered, his blood-soaked body covered with a thin green-pastel sheet. This time I'm sure I'm crying and I'm relieved to find a fast food napkin wedged in the pocket of my car door.

I scan the sparse document over and over, wishing it said more. The location of the accident listed isn't where my mother always said it happened. A box is checked that says my brother died "on the job." I wish it was conspiracy, but I manage to muster acceptance that these are simple transcription errors. The clerk who typed up the death certificate was probably in a rush to finish her work—checkboxes blurred from one section and one certificate to the next. Signed and dated only a few days before Christmas, Margie Finn, County Clerk, probably still had shopping to do, cookies to bake.

As I put the car in reverse, I consider the box on the death certificate that says, "Length of stay: Transient." It refers to the time my brother spent at the hospital—before Dr. Reagan

signed the paperwork that made him officially deceased. Bill was only at Memorial Hospital temporarily, before the mortuary came for his body.

When I was sixteen, I thought I'd live forever and gleefully took risks, driving too fast, drinking too much, having sex with anybody. I was unmotivated by impending consequences, and since I'd had a brother who'd died young, I figured odds were in my favor that I wouldn't get hurt. But my mother says that Bill was different. She claims that the night Granddaddy and Uncle Pat burned his belongings in our backyard, one of the last things pitched in to the fire was a painting Bill made of a single headstone, inscribed with his name. A fresh grave, it sat alone under an oak tree without leaves. My mother's recollection is as fuzzy as those photocopied x's on Bill's death certificate, and only as accurate.

Weaving through the parking lot, I stuff the certificate into my purse sitting on the passenger's side floor seat. I think of my own son, away at college. How lucky I am to know that he loves Indian buffets, black and white movies, and rowing on Lady Bird Lake. Picking up my cell phone, I consider calling my mother, to ask if Bill could swim, if he preferred pancakes or French toast. But instead, driving home, I call my son. I ask how he did on his computer programming final this morning, and remind him to put the new proof-of-insurance card I've mailed him in his glove box.

The Drinking-Bird Universe

My first introduction to physics was a small toy called a drinking-bird, a gift from my father, the family drunk. The toy was an excellent example of a simple heat engine, powered by gravity and displacement. The bird, a hollow barbell-shaped piece of glass, balanced on a stand that looked like big bird feet, the glass filled with a colored liquid that had an exceedingly low boiling point, like my mother.

My father explained the mechanics, “You see, at room temperature, the liquid evaporates at the base of the bird’s body, and the fluid rises up from its tail to its head. Do you understand?” I nodded. “The rising liquid makes the bird top heavy, causing its beak to tip into a water glass,” said my father. Once the beak cooled, the bird wobbled back and forth frantically, only slowing down for another sip. Then the process would start over.

I found the bird’s magical, perpetual motion soothing. The bird was grounded, and gravity was its friend. As a young child, I darted about erratic and clumsy, but physics transported me to another dimension, a place where I was a drinking-bird, living in an entire world filled with drinking-birds— a world where everyone’s actions were predictable, rhythmic, even my parent’s. We bobbed in seamless fashion, in the same direction, the same time space— up, down, up, down. The drinking bird had no wings, no arms, no need to feel, flightless, like me, going nowhere.

I took my drinking-bird with me everywhere my father took me. The toy was particularly entertaining at the bar, while I waited for my father to finish his drink. I would pass the time in fantasy, in my drinking-bird dimension filled with a never ending supply of cool juice and soda in which to dip our beaks, everyone lined up so no one’s heads or tails ever clashed. In my bird

universe the bird trains always ran on time. It was a place where mother birds weren't always screaming at their children, slapping them in grocery stores for not hurrying along.

The drinking-bird made my mother nervous, seeing it made her set her teeth on edge in a particular way that would later cue me in that it was time to run like hell. In my five-year old non-drinking bird universe, my mother took an instant dislike to the toy and smashed its felt covered head with her tight fist, sending its cheery blue top hat spinning across the linoleum, and flammable red blood spilling all over my sundress. The toy's single yellow tail feather and one googly eye sat soaking in a pool, his plastic legs splayed around the remaining end of one of the glass bulbs. Somehow his grape jelly jar drinking glass remained intact throughout the brawl, unlike my mother's dignity.

"Now, now," said my father, brushing away my tears. "There will be more drinking-birds for you. How about one with a purple tail or a striped hat?" But the next day when my father revisited the Marksom's Drugstore in our dilapidated town, the clerk informed him the drinking-birds had sold out. Or that is what my father told me, at least.

My father had a job now long obsolete in this world. For decades he was a unionized newspaper typesetter. Typing the reporter's articles into a monstrous machine called a linotype, the machine spit out slivers of lead alloy planks with the words stamped on top, called slugs. These slugs filled a plate that would be inked and used on the presses to print the news. My father would bring me home handfuls of slugs with my name or the names of my pets printed on them. I stacked them like wooden blocks, ran my fingers across the raised letters, and licked them. In retrospect, it seems that lead toys weren't such a good idea, but I suppose it was no worse than the lead fishing weights I wore as jewelry, or the green lead paint I peeled from my grandparents' aging porch columns. Heavy metal poisoning was the least of my childhood

anxieties.

When my father worked at the linotype, it was his job to decide where to end sentences and cut lines in order to ensure the paragraphs were justified for the paper—my father, the god of print, the master of justification. Perhaps in the drinking-bird universe newspapers still use linotypes, each bird typing out articles one letter at a time with their beaks, drinking-birds wearing hats made of newspapers.

Because of his now-extinct profession, my father could read and write faster in reverse than many people could forward. He loved puzzles. I imagine he often escaped to a dimension where everything was backwards, and only my father and a few others understood the subtext.

The first job I ever had is a job now nearly obsolete. It is at least on some sort of endangered list, like yellow phone books. My job was pre-internet, at another newspaper, in another city. I was a time and temperature girl. You could dial eight numbers and hear my voice chirp out the week's winning lotto numbers in a cheery, bluebird voice, or hear me say, "The temperature is now" before an automated voice filled in the degrees Fahrenheit. I learned how to pronounce the "H" at the beginnings of words, like "humidity" as opposed to dropping them. I had to enunciated words ending with "-ing."

Once, when I went to buy a pack of smokes at a gas station and asked for my favorite brand, the clerk recognized my voice and begged me to say, "Thank you for calling!" I felt like a caged bird, trapped, on the spot, like my secret identity, revealed. I was a drinking-bird, my felt beak dangling, mere millimeters from a vat of poison. I warbled out his request, didn't wait for my change, and never went back to that corner store again.

One Christmas, several years and jobs later, I spotted a shelf filled with drinking glass birds at a novelty shop. There sat my childhood dreams, on display for \$4.99 each, plus tax, right next to the fake plastic vomit and Slinkies. Like everything viewed with adult eyes, the toys seemed much smaller and far less impressive than remembered. I picked one up for a closer look. These drinking-birds were filled with a blue fluid that the box proclaimed, “non-toxic.” This drinking-bird’s hat was askew, and it was missing one of its googly eyes. As I held the small box in my adult-sized hand, I realized my mother likely only had to slap my bird to make the thin, fragile glass shatter. Despite dozens of drinking-birds before me, I was frowning.

I put down the one-eyed drinking bird and selected another, with two. I purchased the toy and went to the coffee shop next door and asked for a glass of water, in addition to my tall Americano. As I sat outside, sipping my coffee, I was transported to a parallel universe where my father was still alive. He and I sat together at the café, sharing my new drinking bird, and admiring its plump, purple tail. We sat in silence, watching the toy drink, wobble back and forth, and take another drink. Hours, days, decades passed, and we watched the bird in stillness, undisturbed.

In the drinking-bird universe there is no need for a spoken language or words, only a basic understanding of gravity, and patience. There is no need for explanations, justification, forgiveness. In the drinking bird universe, we are in the moment. We are only up, down, up, down.

The Radio

“Let me see your radio,” said Gran with a grin. I delivered the avocado green AM transistor over the back seat into her open palm. “Why, it’s as tiny as your feet were the day you were born—well, almost,” she said. “Both of your little tootsies would fit right here, in the palm of my hand. And to think, this radio isn’t much bigger. What will they think of next?” Gran turned back and the small radio dropped into her large lap as she rummaged in her purple and orange flowered hand bag. After pulling out a crumpled tissue, a bottle of pills and a pair of scissors, she produced an iced gingerbread man. I devoured him feet first.

Gran, my mother, Auntie Jane and I were piled in Auntie’s yellow, four-door boat of a Ford. We were traveling to California to visit my sister who’d just had her first baby. My sister had mailed the radio to me a week before we’d set out on our trip. She knew I’d enjoy listening to it when I tired of dressing and undressing my Barbie dolls. And she was right. Not long after eating the cookie, I wanted my toy back. “Gran, Gran, let me have my radio!”

“Since you didn’t say please,” said Gran, “why don’t you look out the back window and count how many cars are behind us?” So I knelt on the backseat, which was covered with heavy protective vinyl. The plastic left a grid of squares across both legs as I counted cars for the next fifteen miles.

Before I reached number thirty, my mother offered a reprieve. “Last stop before we get to the mountains,” she said from behind the wheel. “Want to get some snacks?” Everyone nodded. Eager for privacy and potato chips, I welcomed the chance to use a real toilet at a truck stop instead of the little plastic potty in the floor board.

“The mountains are going to make me really nervous,” said Gran. “I’ve never seen them before.” She frowned as she walked from the truck stop back to the car and the coffee trembled in her cup.

“Oh stop worrying, it’ll be fun,” my mother said. “Besides, if you keep up that fussing, you’re going to scare my baby.”

“You can see their shadows, right over there,” said Gran, pointing west. “Soon we’ll be close enough to touch them, won’t we?”

“We’re not going to go careening off the side of a mountain, Mama,” said Auntie Jane.

Even though I was unsure about seeing mountains for the first time, I loved my grandmother and tried to comfort her. I flung my arms as far around her as I could reach, jostling her coffee, as she lingered by the car door. “It’ll be fine, Gran,” I assured her. “We can listen to my radio, sing along and not even think about the mountains.” Gran smiled faintly before she washed down a blue and white pill with her coffee before shutting the car door.

Momentarily distracted by my snacks, I kicked the back of my grandmother’s seat as I chugged down a bottle of root beer and gobbled up a foot-long piece of bluebird colored taffy. I’d regret my choices later on the winding roads, but for a few miles I was preoccupied. But that didn’t last long. I leaned over the seat, poking my grandmother and cried, “Gran! Gran! Please, please give me my radio back! Please!”

“Yes, please give the child her radio back,” said my mother. I saw her raise her eyebrows in the rearview mirror at my aunt in the seat beside me. My grandmother looked all around her for two or three minutes before she said, “Here it is. Here you go, Sweetie.” I had my hands on one end of the radio, but Gran kept hold of the other, in a playful game of tug-o-war. “I should warn you, radios don’t work in mountain ranges.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Because, silly, the mountains are too high. They block the radio waves. See for yourself!” I snatched the radio from her hand as she loosened her grip. I sat back on the crinkly plastic seats and spun the tuning dial and checked the volume. It was silent, not even a burst of static. “It’s not working at all!” I cried.

“What did I tell you?” Gran said from the front seat as she swallowed another pill and dabbed her forehead with a crumpled tissue.

It was years before I realized that, two hundred miles back, she’d slipped the 9-Volt right out of the back of the little green radio and into her flowered purse. And it wasn’t until I was a parent myself, driving across the country with my own noisy young children, that I realized exactly *why* she’d disabled my radio on that long, long trip.

Sister Annunciation

I'd been a broody hen since Tuesday, keeping an almost unbelievable story incubating all toasty under my wings, eagerly awaiting the game of Truth or Dare I knew we'd play at Elaine Munson's sleepover Friday night. We always played, even though there was never any Ooh la la in our answers. We were the only six girls in sixth grade at Our Lady of Victory Parochial School and we were so isolated we didn't even know how to play the game correctly. It was all truths and no dares and each question could almost always be answered with "no": Sandy'd never kissed a boy on the lips. Lisa James hadn't started her period. Lisa Mattheson didn't cheat on last week's spelling test.

But this time, when it was my turn, no matter what the question was, I'd be ready to blurt out what happened after my guitar lesson on Tuesday. Sister Annunciation, the youngest of all the nuns, had invited me over to her room at the convent built behind our school's playground. As we sat together on the narrow cot in her room, she took off the black and white wimple covering her head, exposing soft, black fuzz, no longer than a new marine's. She reached over, took my hand and said, "Touch it. Touch my hair." I poked at a tuft above her ear and giggled. She held a finger to her lips and silenced me before guiding my hand slowly from the front of her scalp to the back of her neck, as if she was teaching me how to pet a dog. Her hair felt like brush bristles and despite being unsure of what exactly I was doing, I agreed I liked how it felt, when she asked.

"The other sisters are at the grocery store now," said Sister Annunciation. "I would like to unbraid your hair, and touch it like you've touched mine."

"But my mother gets mad if I take my hair down when I'm at school," I whimpered, knowing my mother would be furious if I came home with my hair in a tangled rat's nest.

“Don’t worry, I know how to braid hair, and I’ll put it back. Now, be still.” I sat silent on her cot, with my back to her as she slowly unbraided my hair and ran her fingers through it, from the tip of my scalp to the middle of my back. I was busy worrying whether or not a woman without any hair would really know how to fix it back the way my mother had it before. But she did know how, and after a half hour, she abruptly turned me around to face her. She slowly braided one pigtail and then the other. Her delicate hands grazed each of my non-existent breasts with each weave. Then, she leaned close and whispered into my ear. My cheeks were red when she nudged me off her cot. “Go home now and pray your rosary. I’ll see you in the morning.”

And then it was Wednesday, Thursday and finally Friday. As we sat on Elaine’s pink shag carpet, our sleeping bags fanning out in a circle like the arms of an octopus, I told them my big news—about the stubble on Sister Annunciation head, and how she played with my hair. Sandy shrugged and Lisa Mattheson yawned. The other Lisa said, “Big deal. Some of the nuns shave their heads, because vanity is a sin.”

Flustered by how unimpressed the girls were, I balked, “But Sister said next Tuesday, after guitar class, she’s going to show me the hair under her habit, down there!” I pointed towards my crotch just as I noticed Elaine’s mother standing in the doorway. She dropped an entire tray of milk and cookies. As her hands trembled, she ordered us to go get paper towels and clean up the mess, and then she marched me home.

My mother stood under the porch light and told me to thank Mrs. Munson for bringing me home. Elaine’s mother asked mine if she had a minute to talk. My mother picked up a chunk of my tangled hair and sighed before ordering me to bed. I raced up the stairs, straining to listen to their conversation from my bedroom window—but they were as hushed as Sister Annunciation had been with me on her cot. After Elaine’s mother left, my mother didn’t say a

single word to me about the sleepover that night. She didn't mention it the next morning, or ever again.

I was surprised on Monday, even sad, to learn that that before I'd even had my frozen waffles that morning, Sister Annunciation was being driven to the San Antonio airport to board a silver airplane that would fly her back home to Guam. In the morning assembly, Father Larry looked straight at me when he informed the students that Sister Annunciation had a death in her family and left the country immediately. I sucked on the end of my pony tail and I wondered if Father Larry's announcement was a truth or a dare. Either way, I knew I should've kept the story about Sister Annunciation to myself.

The Other Girl in the Photo

I open my mail directly over the recycling container outside my garage door: the utility bill, pizza coupons, another charity request from St. Jude's and the Red Cross, and a yellow greeting card envelope. My mother has sent me a grainy photo, an orange-tinted Polaroid of two girls in cowboy hats wearing fringed brown vests and skirts.

Immediately, I recognize my cousin, Rose. Probably six years old, she's smiling the same smile she flashes today if someone points a camera in her direction. Her head tilted to one side, her grin wide, all dimples, her cheeks, round as golf balls. Her white cowboy hat sits squarely on her head and her coffee-colored ringlets peek out from under the brim. She clasps her hands in front of her, blue eyes wide, as if she's just been promised a trip to Disneyland.

Besides Rose stands a girl at the edge of the photo, sneering. Whoever is telling her to say, "Cheese" should give up. It is me, of course—the other girl in the photo, older, maybe seven or eight. I don't remember when the photograph was taken or why we are both wearing matching outfits. What had me in such a mood, one fist perched on my hip, the other hand in a ball by my hat? My eyes squint in the way our grandmother described as "mean pig eyes." My hat cocked to the side and my pigtails are half-way unbraided, a mess.

Still a mess, I stand in my side yard in a purple bathrobe, my hair pulled under a ball cap so as not to completely frighten the neighbors. It is 2 p.m. on a Saturday and I haven't brushed my teeth. I look at the photo and scan my yard. The lawn needs mowing and the rose bushes are growing into the neighbor's yard. I look at my face in the photo and try to replicate my childhood sneer, reaching to feel if my lip is curled, my canine teeth flashing.

Tossing everything but the photo into the bin, I tell myself I'll go to Walgreens this afternoon and get a copy made of the photo for Rose. She'll be amused by the gesture and may

remember why we were dressed like that, why I was so angry. Rose has a better memory, and loves to tell childhood stories about us, like when Becky McCurdy drove her yellow banana bike past our grandparents' sidewalk where we were playing hopscotch. Becky called Rose an "ugly cow" and made her cry. Chasing after Becky on foot, I yanked her off her bike and beat on her until the next door neighbor threatened to squirt me with his watering hose.

Rose always tears up when she tells this story, but I have no recollection of the event, not even Becky. Maybe it is a defense mechanism, or some sort of cognitive disorder. I struggle to remember the date of my first marriage, and the second. Now I'm on my third and use my anniversary numbers for my ATM pin, to keep it fresh in my mind. I must write everything down, to keep connected.

I don't feel a connection with this angry little girl dressed in western wear. If I had to guess, I'd suspect I'm furious because my mother made me wear the fringed skirt and white cowboy boots. What I do remember is that I wasn't like Rose, I wasn't delicate. I was rowdy. While Rose carefully tap-danced at our recital, I was likely making the same sneering face as I shuffle-ball-stepped out of rhythm with the music. While Rose wanted to play the flute in the school band, I wanted to play the drums. She was a cheerleader and I skipped class and smoked in the parking lot. She developed a curvy hourglass figure. I stayed willowy, so thin and gangly that my mother said I'd never get a husband if I didn't wear a bra. I didn't see the point, and I still got a husband. More than one.

But I did everything in the wrong order. Married young, had children young, divorced young. And Rose? Rose continued to do everything right. She worked her way through nursing school, paid off her debts promptly, saved her money, and married a doctor. It made me wish sometimes that I'd been a better rule-follower. Rose followed the rules, lives in a tidy suburb,

and all that's missing from her life is a child—and that's about to change.

I was at work when she called me. “You’ll never believe it, I’m pregnant,” she said. “But please don’t tell Mama. I haven’t told my husband either.”

“That is the best news! I can’t believe it, especially after yesterday.”

The day before, I’d held her hand while the vet put down her sixteen year old lab. I patted her back while she sobbed. When the vet left, she looked at me with her big, wet eyes and whispered, “I feel so ashamed. I didn’t cry like that when Gran or Granddaddy died.” I tried to reassure her, but she kept crying. And then the next day, she called me in the same whisper, to tell me that after trying for ten years. She was pregnant, “It’s like God took something away with my dog, Bobby, and gave me something greater in return.” I wasn’t sure about God, but I knew she’d make a good mother. I was ecstatic for her.

A passing police car siren shifts me back into the present, and I push the recycling bin back in its place. I turn the photo over, wondering if there’s a date to clue me in as to when this photo was taken. But what I find is my mother’s handwriting, a note that says, “Wasn’t Rose the most adorable child?” I slip the photo into my bathrobe pocket and head back into my house to press some coffee. I promised Rose I’d meet her at her birthing class this afternoon. Since I’m usually ten minutes late to everything, I decide to just give her the photo.

Mop Buckets and Birthday Cards

Michael leans back in his plastic chair in the Lane Murray prison visiting room, talking nonstop about the soaring August temperatures. I try to absorb what he's saying, but I'm fixated on his freckled hands. Gesturing broadly with both arms—a doughnut in each hand—he's raining a fine mist of powdered sugar across the table and down on to the grimy linoleum while he rambles about the 106 degree west Texas heat and the never-ending piles of laundry he must face after I leave. He pauses, pushes up his glasses and extends a doughnut, but I shake my head as he resumes his list of complaints.

I shift uncomfortably in my chair, looking at Michael as he holds up two fingers, and then a third, counting off the list of injustices against him. “You wouldn't believe how they treat me in here,” said Michael. “There's no air conditioning, no Internet, no real coffee, and not a drop of fabric softener for our clothes, not even our underwear. This poly-blend is scratchy,” he said pulling at his striped shirt.

Michael swallows another doughnut and begins talking again before I have a chance to join in the conversation. “Do you know all the hoops I'm forced to jump through every month just to get my allergy medicines refilled? I'm convinced that bitch they call a doctor is really a damn veterinarian. There is no way she's an actual medical doctor.” Michael points towards the vending machine, his hands empty. “More doughnuts okay, the chocolate ones if they have them,” he said. It's those hands that landed him here. And no matter what he says, I can never get it out of my mind that Michael murdered his wife.

Who would've guessed I'd be sitting in the Lane Murray Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's visiting room for two hours at a stretch, listening to a guy complain about his civil rights and underwear? Not me. I also never expected to be on my hands and knees

prying loose a large puddle of dried blood off blonde bamboo floors with a putty knife. When blood pools and sits for a few days, it doesn't wipe up easily with hot soapy water. Instead, it congeals in lumpy globs that must be pried up and out, like chewing gum stuck in the grooves of tennis shoe soles.

While Michael sat in limbo at the Travis county jail, my friends and I mopped up the remnants of his post-police investigation crime. If these hardwood floors had belonged to the victim, then the state of Texas would've ponied up for the house to be scoured by a crew of professionals in hazmat suits. But Michael wasn't the victim. And the house was in his name. His house, his crime scene. This is where he'd beaten his wife and strangled her to death, leaving others to deal with the aftermath.

You think of strange things when you scrub up the blood of the dead. I clean and try my best to dissociate. Try to convince myself that this stain is something other than what it actually is. Try not to think about the woman who had the same first name as mine, who lived in this house for less than a year. I dip the rag back into the bucket and desperately try not to wonder exactly where in this house she was found naked—wrapped in the very shower curtain she likely picked out. She has become the woman who in an instant is no longer tangible, only “the victim,” only, “Michael's dead wife.”

But I kid myself. Wringing out the now rust-colored washcloth, I can think only of her. Did she know Michael had it in him? The neighbors that the news crews interviewed sure didn't. They said all the things neighbors are supposed to say in those situations. He was quiet, a good neighbor. He always put up his trash cans. He kept a beautiful yard with manicured hedges, edged curbs, and a tidy walkway lined with trailing silvery Wandering Jew plants.

And, really, he didn't seem like the type. Michael made sure everyone he met knew he was an avid animal lover, a vegan, a Buddhist who meditated twice a day. I sat with him once in meditation, on similar hardwood floors, my lower back aching. At one point, I opened my eyes and was surprised by his serenity. I think now how he held his jaw and wonder if he kept his eyelids gently lowered, his lips slightly apart while he sat on his wife's chest, hands around her neck for three full minutes? He could've stopped, but he didn't. He could've called 911, but he didn't. I guess we all make our own choices.

My significant other interrupts my contemplation with a gentle kiss on the top of my head. I am startled, almost knocking over the bucket of water that stinks of a terrible mix of copper, Christmas trees, and spoiled hamburger meat. She hands me bottled water and asks if I'm okay, if I need anything, if I need to talk. We've been together for ten years, Elaine and me. She is a natural caretaker, well trained. A psychotherapist and social worker—just like Michael was before all this happened. Telling me how much she appreciates my help, she struggles to avoid looking like she's leaning against the wall just to keep from fainting. She takes a sip of water and slowly lowers herself to a dry spot on the floor.

Elaine started interferon therapy for chronic Hepatitis C two weeks before Michael killed his wife. A weekly chemotherapy treatment, it leaves her nauseated, anemic, dizzy, and weak. She'd painstakingly scheduled her time and client caseload to best accommodate her year-long treatment, not knowing that her oldest friend would kill his wife, and that her mother would suffer a debilitating stroke—all in the same week. She was incredibly sick and stressed, but amazingly dedicated.

Looking at her loosening waistband, the dark circles under her eyes, as I continue to scrub, I know I'll have to step in and help with either Michael or her mother, and I silently

choose him. Elaine rubs her temples while offering to change out the water in my bucket.

Instead, I change the subject. We talk about what we'll do after we go home and shower. Maybe we'll go get some sushi, go to a movie. Watch something funny, where no one gets killed.

Once, when Michael talked on the phone and I listened, he compared going to jail like dying. "Once those cuffs went on and all my things were taken from me—even my best vegan belt—it was exactly like dying." I remember him using the word "exactly" and the hair standing up on the back of my neck. Since Michael didn't have to scrub up his dead wife's blood, I wanted to disagree with him, but there wasn't enough time left on the call. He still had to tell me precisely how he wanted his affairs handled and in what order, as the tinny automated voice reminded there were only "five minutes remaining."

And there was a lot to put in order. While Elaine and I were trying to move into a house of our own, Michael's house still had to be cleaned, emptied, and sold. A mountain of items had to be carted to Goodwill—measuring spoons, luggage, decorative trashcans—things he wouldn't need anytime soon. His two rescued pit bulls and a couple of Siamese cats had to be checked on, twice daily, before they were eventually adopted. Since he'd been estranged from his parents and family in Baton Rouge for more than twenty years, he only had us to settle his affairs.

In the early days there were plenty of people to help, because no one, no one believed Michael really murdered his wife. But that handful of people eventually dwindled down to me, Elaine, and Michael's ex-girlfriend, as the *Austin-American Statesman* and TV reports conflicted with his version of the events. It became impossible to believe his excuses. *It wasn't my fault. She slipped and hit her head. My hand just got caught in the collar of her shirt and I couldn't get it out. She was hurting me. It was self-defense.*

Michael's litany of justifications didn't match up with the crime scene photos the lawyer showed us, photos so much more difficult to look at in person than on those crime-show dramas on T.V. Photos I wish I could forget seeing—Laura, in a heap on the floor, in the hall by the bathroom. She was discolored and unmistakably dead, her nose broken. Her partially closed eyes were swollen and black, while black and yellow hand-shaped bruises circled her neck. The little details I learned from the lawyers made things somehow worse: The blue and white polka-dotted shower curtain. After he killed her, he stripped her of her clothes. He wrapped her in their shower curtain, hopped in his Honda and drove around all night, looking for a place to dump her body. He came back early the next morning and managed to drag her about two feet towards his front door. She outweighed him easily by a hundred and fifty pounds. He realized he simply didn't have the upper body strength to lift her up and into the car's trunk, and he gave up. He had to turn himself in.

His lawyers showed Elaine and me these pictures, and told us they needed us to help convince Michael to take a plea. "He wants a jury trial, but a jury will hate him. He keeps blaming his wife Laura. He's incapable of sounding remorseful," said one of the attorneys, "Get him to take the plea. If not, he'll spend the rest of his life in prison." It was hard not to hate Michael, looking at these pictures, when the bloodstains were still fresh. Michael quickly convinced himself he was innocent, and talked about it incessantly, daily in twenty-minute bursts over the county jail phones. We knew he wasn't innocent. We'd mopped up the blood. But we did what the lawyers said and encouraged him to take the plea, doing our best to make forty years in jail sound as appealing as possible to 48-year-old Michael, so a jury didn't sentence him to life without parole. And after months of weighing his options, he agreed, with the promise of a successful appeal in the near future and monthly visits until he was home again, and with that, I

was made his power of attorney. Despite being in shackles at his sentencing, Michael managed to wave to me and smile when the deputy escorted him into the court room. My head tingled and I felt sick to my stomach.

I wonder if Michael lets himself think about the “what ifs.” Like what would’ve happened if he’d managed to put his dead wife’s body in the car. Would he have said she’d left him? Gone back to El Paso to be closer to her adult son? It wasn’t that Michael was a weakling and just couldn’t pick her up, why he didn’t have the upper body strength of a typical man, another reason the lawyers wanted to keep him off the stand. Something else made him different in a way most people, including some of his closest friends, didn’t know before his picture flashed on Austin’s local television screen under salacious headlines shouting “Surprise twist in Austin murder case.” Michael used to be a woman. He’d gone to the same high school as Elaine, but then he’d had long red hair, worn peasant blouses, and was named Teresa, a girl who considered herself a radical feminist lesbian. But the last twenty years, he’d lived as a man, through the magic of plastic surgery and weekly hormone shots. Despite still having female genitals, he’d changed his birth certificate and legally married the woman he murdered.

Michael thought the transgender community would gladly carry his cause and rally support, and he badgered me by mail about getting the word out. I was grateful that unlike county jail, prisons don’t let inmates have access to phones. Michael couldn’t believe that his own community was horrified about what he did and that they had no intention of helping him, fearing people would think it was the testosterone injections he took that made him a killer. Michael decided I just wasn’t explaining his plight in the right way, especially since I was unable to convince Amnesty International to come to his aid. They didn’t consider it a violation of his

human rights to be made to wear what Michael considered gender inappropriate underwear at all times while incarcerated, a fact Michael was furious about. He didn't even want to be incarcerated with women, but the state said he had no choice. It was for his safety.

I worry about his appeals. Worry that he'll win. His lawyers think a technicality will eventually lead to his early release. On video, in one of the police station interview rooms, Michael timidly asks the detectives interrogating him immediately after being arrested, "Do I need a lawyer?" Several other times he says, "I think I might need a lawyer." They continue to question him, despite his words that don't syntactically count as an official requests for legal representation. They question him until he says, "I want a lawyer." I wonder if he thought of this tactic that same night he drove around, before he turned himself in. He's clever, like that. He lost his first appeal, but he has more. This keeps me up some nights, the thought of his being released because the police made a mistake. At least things don't happen fast in these situations. The appeals process takes a long time, and in that, I take some comfort.

For the first year and a half, I made the two and a half hour drive from Austin to Gatesville, every month to visit Michael. I'd made a promise, after all. Most of the time, if Elaine felt up to the ride, she'd join me—if she wasn't sitting with her mother at the Acorn Villas nursing home. We were privileged to have contact visits with him. We could sit in a room, at a table across from him. No more sitting on hard stools in front of scratched and dirty Plexiglas windows, wishing for hand sanitizer wipes for the filthy, well-worn phones like at the county jail.

But the visits were exhausting. Time passes differently in prison and for Michael, no matter what I did for him, it wasn't ever enough. He wasn't interested in what was going on in the outside world and really only wanted an audience for the injustices he felt were being committed against him. He was remorseless and griped about his dead wife for getting him in this mess. He complained about his wife's son, who'd given a passionate victim's statement at his sentencing, and wrote Michael irate letters, often. Michael obsessed how the Texas Penal System wouldn't make food exceptions or provide him with a vegetarian diet, even though the state doesn't make exceptions even for religious reasons. Michael said it was all enough to make him kill himself. Anytime I seemed to start to lose interest, he'd threaten suicide, to ensure I'd listen to his requests and grievances.

He wanted me to contact his representatives, senators, anyone really, to plead his case that he was wrongly accused. But he wasn't wrongly accused, and the visits were so overwhelming I knew I couldn't keep up the monthly trek to the prison much longer. Our last visit, he went on and on about how hot it was, how unfair it was that Texas prisons aren't air-conditioned. But I kept thinking of his wife, who didn't have air-conditioning either. And I thought of her son, who no longer had a mother. At the end of our visit, I said I'd be back the same time next month, but I knew it was a lie. And then I lied again, saying I'd miss him, as he walked out with the guard.

It was hard for me to admit to myself that I couldn't stand to keep up my promise to visit Michael on a regular basis anymore. I'd told him I'd visit, I'd made a commitment. But I was so tired of hearing how he'd made himself the victim. Tired of hearing how many people in prison weren't guilty at all, but just had shit lawyers. How when Michael gets out he's going to show up on Laura's son's doorstep and explain the situation "exactly." I debate with myself, and

decide writing letters to him will be a fair substitute for visits for the time being. He'd told me how important mail is to prisoners, how crucial it is to not be forgotten. I'd promised I wouldn't forget him, so I send him letters and greeting card for every holiday, always having to choose the cards carefully based on their inscriptions. There is no cake to eat in prison and prisoners can't really "live it up on your birthday." Drugstore cards come across as pointed, mocking those in prison who won't be "Home for the Holidays." And I sure didn't "wish he was here." I'd write him letters about benign things, what the pets were doing, what color I was considering painting the hall. I'd avoid things that might evoke homesickness like references to Casa de Luz, his favorite vegetarian restaurant or the SXSW music festival. I didn't send him news from mutual friends of his and Elaine's, the ones who told us they hoped he'd rot in jail. That his Zen thing was an act, that he'd been just as abusive as a woman as he was as a man. How they weren't surprised something like this would've happened.

In turn, Michael writes long letters to Elaine and me. They always include to-do lists, telling us who we should contact on his behalf, what senator to call, what exactly to tell the legislators. What kind of calendar he needs us to send him. What books are on the approved list he wants to read. At the end of his letters, typically ten yellow legal pad pages long, written in tiny print on the front and back, he usually writes, "So, how are you?" It is time for his birthday, so I search for funny cards, but keep finding ones that seem more inappropriate than ever for the inmate population. *Better to be over the hill than buried under it. May this be your best year, ever. You can get away with anything on your birthday.*

I've prayed that each of his appeals would be denied. I don't want him out of prison. Not when he isn't sorry. Not when he can't even pretend to be sorry. Sometimes I have nightmares

that he is on my doorstep, livid, because I convinced him to take the plea. He is angry that I stopped coming to visit. He wants his belongings back from his house, his espresso cups carted off to Goodwill, and he wants me to apologize, for abandoning him. I write him and promise I'll visit soon. I write him because I am afraid he'll be released.

I wish that Michael had fangs, or horns. Some visible warning that he is a sociopath. But he is attractive, amiable and tells a mean joke. Over our morning coffee, Elaine warns me that he is almost the perfect combination of my mother, who used charm and manipulation to always get what she wanted, and my emotionally unavailable father. I shudder, realizing Michael is a sort of second chance for me to please the parents I never could. I make plans that morning to call my old therapist, to get back into therapy.

I see statistics on violence almost daily, everywhere, even in ladies magazines, domestic violence statistics and warnings interspersed between recipes for cupcakes and tips on how to remove grass stains from Junior's soccer shorts. The threat is always the same: you are more likely to be molested, kidnapped, raped, beaten or murdered by someone you know. The "someone" might be the person sitting by you, right now. But I don't find statistics for a crime like this. Michael's situation is complicated. Hormone therapy made his jaw square, a mastectomy removed his breasts. He didn't look like he'd ever been a woman. His ex-girlfriend often muses how she'd slept by him every night for six years and never worried about her safety. I don't find this comforting, and at the end of the day, Michael killed his wife. And I wonder, why?

I pass through the various prison checkpoints, starting at the entry gate. I open the car hood, doors, trunk, even the glove box. The guard searches the car before I can park, and the wind is so strong that I must hold on to the door to keep it from slamming shut. I leave my cell phone in the car, my purse. You can only take your keys and twenty dollars in quarters for the snack machines. Separated from the outside world as another guard wands me, I ache for my Chapstick, sitting in my car's cup holder, for a couple of aspirin, for the tiny familiar things I like to keep at hand.

Everything in the maximum security prison lobby is painted the sort of green you must get from combining gallons of half-used paint. It reminds me of mold or algae, growing under a rock, and I wonder if it adds to the dissonance the prisoners must feel. The visiting room looks like an elementary school cafeteria, with strange and oddly out of proportion murals of beach scenes and zoo animals covering several of the walls that I'm guessing the prisoners painted. The Texas flag sits crookedly in the corner of the room, which is filled with uncomfortable plastic seats, wobbly tables and vending machines. An overpowering odor of orange air freshener, which I equate with the cleanser my elementary school janitor used to clean up children's vomit, lingers in the air.

The guards will notify him I'm there, and I wait. In about ten minutes, Michael is at the door, wearing his prison bests, white cotton scrubs. He smiles and looks like he could be a doctor, only missing the stethoscope. When we hug, he smells of bleach and sweat, and I wish I knew why I am here by myself on a Saturday when I could be home doing things I'd enjoy. Elaine has better boundaries than I do. She doesn't want to drive to West Texas to listen to him complain about his treatment, so she doesn't make the trip. She thinks about him, maybe not

every day, but almost. But 40 years is a long time, and I feel strangely guilty, even though I know if the situation were reversed, he wouldn't be visiting me.

Sitting at the table, he asks me to send him lyrics to various songs from the 90s. The only radio signals he can pick up are conservative AM radio shows and the occasional country station if the wind is blowing right. Having the song lyrics helps, he says, just like the photos of food torn from magazines he tapes above his bunk. He tells me song after song and I nod my head in agreement, but I'll never be able to remember more than a few, since I can't have a paper or pen to write things down. I know he'll send me a letter after the visit with all of his requests, bulleted. So I continue to nod. He asks me to send cartoons, and pictures of the pets. He asks for more doughnuts, something salty, and a Dr. Pepper. I get the stuff out of the vending machine and hand it over to the guard who'll dump the snacks out into a brown paper bag, inspect it for contraband, and bring it back to Michael. Watching him eat another bag of Funions and finish his second can of Diet Dr. Pepper, I realize this is likely his favorite part of the visit.

Michael is eligible for parole after serving twenty years. In 2025, he'll be 66, and since he's been a model inmate, he'll likely be let out, if not sooner due to state budget cuts, which he's banking on. And I'm afraid. I dread the day he'll show up on my doorstep with a list of the things of his that he wants back, things sitting in my backyard shed, likely covered with spider webs. His framed college diplomas, his tax returns from twenty years back, a couple of rocks he kept on his old back porch, a heavy concrete bird bath, and numerous other things he's kept track of all these years. These thoughts pass through my mind as I try to focus on Michael, who's telling an animated story about another inmate. Listening to him chuckle, looking into his unapologetic hazel eyes, I'm sorry he didn't get his wish for a jury trial.

The guard comes by and taps Michael on the shoulder. Our visit is up and he stands with arms wide for a hug. He tells me to come back next month, reminds me that he hasn't had any other visitors in years. I smile, reassuring him I'll be back next month, even though I won't. I watch him walk away, through the visiting room doors, before I brush the powdered sugar from my blouse.

I write Michael, trying to think of something new to tell him, and decide to tell him about my garden. At the same time Michael killed his wife, Elaine and I were closing on a house of our own. The previous owners of the house we bought dug up all the rose bushes, dogwoods and small trees before as they were leaving, and the yard looked as if it had been scorched. Michael's yard, on the other hand, was overrun with beautiful, lush Wandering Jew plants, their tiny purple flowers sprinkling the entire backyard and growing over the sidewalks he so carefully maintained.

In my letter, I told him how on the spur of the moment I dug up as many of the unruly plants as I could to transport from his house to mine. I filled five moist trash bags with dozens of plants and spent hours replanting them in my barren yard. I was surprised how quickly they took root and multiplied. Our front yard is almost covered with them, a sea of green, purple and silver leaves, sparkling with tiny blooms. I write how when I see them I always think of him, how they persevere, propagate.

Several days later, Michael writes back. He tells me how he spent hours every weekend, every single weekend, pulling those plants up by their roots, trying to contain them. But they still managed to overtake his yard. They always came back. He marveled how the more he tried to destroy them, the more they flourished. He adds an address of a nonprofit program he heard

about that lobbies for the rights of the incarcerated, and writes an abbreviated message of the letter he wants me to send them. He asks how we are, and signs off, “Love and Peace, M.”

A Friend of Flipper

Shelia, the dolphin girl, sits on the edge of the fountain every day during her lunch break. She usually drinks a Big Red soda and reads a book about the ocean, while I write in my journal. We work at the “Shells and More” gift shop near Mustang Beach. Sheila’s in charge of the sea shell mobiles, shell jewelry and don’t-you-wish-you-were-here tie-dyed dolphin t-shirts. She’s obsessed with the dolphin t-shirts and figurines, and constantly rearranges them. After sharing a bungalow with her for the last two years, I sort of understand why.

Shelia grew up in Southville, Texas, about sixty miles north of the Gulf. While most children pretended to be puppies or ponies, she liked playing dolphin. She would zip around the house holding her arms straight by her side, squealing “Eeek-eeek.” Her parents thought they might be able to channel her energy out of their living room and into the local swimming pool. They kept trying for three summers, but Shelia would only stand on the first step of the pool eeeking and crying, until her parents gave in and brought her home.

Her mother worried when at sixteen, Sheila still showed more interest in dolphins than dating boys. Her father thought she just needed time. When she finally stopped answering every questions with one “eeek” for yes and two “eeeks” for no, her parents and friends decided her fixation with dolphins was only a sign she’d grow up to be a marine biologist or an oceanographer. But Sheila didn’t finish college. Because of a warm-up exercise at a welcome mixer during her freshman orientation at Texas State, she barely started.

All the new students sat in a circle. The freshmen would get to know each other by taking turns answering the question, “Which dead celebrity would you most like to have dinner with?” When it was Shelia’s turn, she pulled a small framed photo from her purse. “Flipper,” she said, and gave the smiling sea creature in the photo a quick kiss. Everyone laughed, saying she was

terribly clever. But Shelia was mortified. She jumped up from the circle, her face burning and cried, “Eeeek, eeeek.” While the group moved on to those who wanted to dine with Kurt Cobain, Marilyn Monroe and Jesus, Shelia ran back to her dorm, packed her bags and left.

Back home, she told her parents that she was a dolphin trapped in a woman’s body. Her father didn’t look up from his newspaper. Her mother suggested she take a trip to Europe or the Caribbean. So she could find herself. Sheila seized her chance. She told her parents she’d go to Paris. Instead, Sheila took the \$10,000 her parents gave her and headed straight for the Philippines. There she found a surgeon who gave her the dorsal fin implant she’d longed for. It was beautiful and silvery, but it wasn’t erect. Her fin flopped from one side to the other. But she felt happier than she ever had before. She decided on her flight back to Texas that her new home would be the beach. That’s how Sheila ended up selling seashells by the seashore.

Today, as Sheila and I sit on the edge of the fountain during our break, Sheila mentions her fin needs moisturizing. As she munches on a tuna sandwich, I squirt baby lotion on my hand and slip it under the back of her shirt. As I spread the lotion over her leathery fin, Shelia reminds me her bra strap is constantly rubbing against it, but it is worth it because it makes her feel more like herself. She talks about getting bottom surgery and bemoans that even if it was legal in the U.S., she couldn’t afford the procedure on her gift shop pay. She comforts herself knowing the medical technology hasn’t evolved yet. Science can add a tail, but what good is it if you can’t use it? Sheila’s not giving up hope. Her courage makes me smile. I remind her to always embrace her inner dolphin. I desperately wish she wanted to be more than just friends.

As Sheila sips Big Red, she tells me she’s off to protest the treatment of her brothers and sisters at Sea World on Saturday. I ask if I can join her. Showing me her now pink teeth, she says “Eeeek-eeeek-eeeek-eeeek!” I hope that the sound and her grin mean “yes.” She takes another

swig of soda and reads me the schedule for the local pool. Shelia's planning on signing up for beginning swimming lesson and thinks this time, they'll stick.

Nova

When my life intersected with Nova's, some twenty years ago, you'd probably say I'd been better off if I'd turned around and walked out of the door—and you might be right. But the university's group therapy program had a long waiting list, and I'd made it through the group therapy interview process. My contract was signed. I'd pledged I'd adhere to all the rules and guidelines. Like a girl scout, I vowed to use my words and respect other members' time and space. I promised to keep the confidentiality of the group and ensure it would always be a safe atmosphere in which to share.

The last available chair in the circle of seats was farthest from the door. I sat down by a striking woman wearing a garnet beret and navy wool pea coat with big brass buttons. She wore purple ribbed tights and a pair of chunky black boots—Doc Martin's—long before you could just go pick up a pair at the mall. She introduced herself as Nova, “like the singer, not the car.” She must've meant “Vega” like Suzanne and the Chevy, but I chalked it up to a translation issue. She had the most amazing French accent, the first I'd ever heard in person.

I was mesmerized by her sleek bobbed hair, her tittering laugh, her snaggle-toothed grin. Funny how memory works, isn't it? I have a vague idea of what the room we were in looked like. Maybe there was a poster on the wall that discouraged suicide? I remember the mismatched circle of chairs, but I don't really remember the minor details like if there was carpet, what the weekly fee was, or even the name of the woman facilitating our group. It's been a long time, I guess.

I do recall that the therapist handed out stacks of worksheets from a yellow book entitled *Courage to Heal*. When Nova passed me my packet she sneered, even elbowed me. “More like ‘Carriage to Hell’ if you ask me!” Nova was surprising, funny. I was falling in love. Again. But

no, I wasn't, I'd signed my group therapy agreement—words on paper were important to me. Words were binding—I'd vowed to use my words, to respect the other members. We were not allowed to interact outside of the therapeutic group setting. Love was not an option.

Our therapeutic group consisted of seven or eight not yet *really* adult children of alcoholics. It was a popular cohort at the time, if popular is the right word. Better than the victims of satanic cults that met Wednesdays or Multiple Personality Mondays. Nova was popular. She managed to tell the worst memories week after week, spilling out stories filled with vicious childhood traumas. She punctuated tales of neglect and abuse with grand hand gestures and minute particulars. She'd stop mid-sentence and say, "How do you say it, 'teeth'?" in her charming accent, pointing to the black space where her molars should've been, while talking about her sixteenth birthday. Her gift that year was two knocked out teeth. She'd told her mother she was moving to the states, to escape all the abuse. Her mother disagreed.

Nova's awful train-wreck stories made her the darling of the group. She had these big sad eyes accentuated by dark kohl eyeliner. I wanted to pay attention to her words, but it was her cabernet-colored lips I followed minute by minute. Open shut, open shut. Someone interrupted her. The therapist reminded us to avoid cross talk. The therapist loved her, too.

The first rule I broke in our therapy contract, was meeting Nova outside of the group, at Coffee Shack. We sat there for hours, Nova teaching me the art of smoking like a French woman. I was eighteen and at twenty-six she didn't have to be from another country to infatuate me. Her maturity made her exotic as her hair, dyed so black, it was blue, like the grackles lining the café sidewalks, screeching at us for bread crumbs. She kicked at them with her heavy boots, muttering what I assumed were French obscenities. From her, the threats sounded beautiful.

I felt guilty for the group indiscretion, but I rationalized Nova's attention was beneficial. She was teaching me things, and she admitted we were breaking the rules. Nova told me I should speak up more for myself, about myself. So because of Nova, in our sixth group session, I had the bravery, the courage if you will, to discuss my wedding day. I told the group about my mother's quick fist. The change of hairstyle required to cover a last minute black eye. How it wasn't the first or even the last. Several group members nodded in agreement when I said the word, "clumsy." The therapist didn't interject.

Everyone in the therapy group, in every therapy group I'd ever attended before Nova, always had okay mothers, so-so mothers, ineffectual mothers. But never abusive mothers. It was their fathers that burned them with cigarettes, who held them under the bathwater. Fathers who'd beat them with their belts. Before Nova, I was always the exception, carrying my physically abusive mother hidden deep within. I'd lie, making my father the villain of the piece. But not Nova. Her mother wasn't an alcoholic either. But she was cruel, abusive, and a bully. But Nova wasn't timid. She'd found her voice and spoke of her abusers with something akin to valor. She could've been a motivational speaker. A poster child for abused children—in edgy European clothing.

The second rule I broke in my group therapy contract was meeting Nova for a midnight showing of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. But we never made it out of the exterior lobby. We smoked cigarettes and she began a one-woman-show, imitating various members in our therapy group, breaching not just our confidentiality, but theirs. There was Georgia who "thought" her father she never knew might have been an alcoholic, and Tracy who started every sentence with "When my father sexually molested me..." Nova made it a joke. Said they took themselves too seriously. And since her childhood narratives were always the worst—broken teeth, forced to

have sex with both parents, abandoned to a cult leader...well, it seemed like she somehow won. Her prize seemed to be the right to mock the others, maybe a little. I knew it was wrong, but Nova made it seem permissible, palatable, but I was ashamed.

Nova sat patiently in group sessions. She participated thoughtfully, actively listened. She let people know she heard what they said, that she understood. Nova expressed herself through therapeutic language and leaned forward, looked into people's eyes. She used all the right body language. It made me jealous, the attention she paid the others. I'd sit silently in the group, counting down the minutes until I could get out of that moldy old building and have a smoke.

I tore up my copy of our group therapy contract the day Nova and I had sex in the dressing room of the costume shop on First Street. Nova, yanking off her black turtleneck before putting her hand up my denim skirt. I didn't see it coming, but even if I had, I wouldn't have stopped her. But wait, it isn't as lurid as it sounds. I'm telling it wrong. Saying too much. I was young and shy. I felt guilty for breaking the rules. So much so, I stopped going to the therapy sessions. And without weekly group therapy, I was without Nova. The woman who taught me about import records and slam dancing. The woman who helped me find my voice and the reverse gear in my VW Jetta.

A few months later, right before the beginning of the winter semester break, Nova called me. Me. She needed a ride to the airport. She was flying home. One of the bravest things I'd ever done, up until that point in my life, was asking her if we could grab breakfast, first. I clutched the phone to my heart. Oui. Oui. Oui.

"You know, I'm not coming back," she announced, waving her gloved hand over her

coffee cup.

“Your Visa?” I stammered, “But you’re a student. Why wouldn’t they let you come back? I bet the people in the group will miss you. I miss seeing you, in the group. Um, out of the group.” I stumbled over my words, awkwardly dabbing at the tabletop with my napkin. “I wish I was going with you, to Paris.”

Nova laughed the same big laugh, the same way she made fun of Ella in the group. The nervous girl whose father would dump out his ashtray, just to make her clean it up. I realized then, in that moment, while she adjusted the flower in her hair, she probably mocked my southern drawl, with someone else, in some other dressing room. Nova didn’t mind breaking the rules. She relished breaking them.

“Sarah, Sarah,” she said, reaching across the table, putting her woolen hands on each side of my hot face. “You sweet, silly girl.” I’m from Colorado Spring, for shit’s sake. I’m not really French. You didn’t really think I was French did you? I must be a better actress than I thought.” She laughed until she was doubled over. She bumped her head on the bistro table and laughed some more. “I flunked out, again. That’s all.” And then Nova laughed more, before blowing her nose into a tissue she’d pulled from her coat.

I sat in stunned silence, my coffee growing cold, as Nova talked about her mother, a dental hygienist, who’d be picking her up. In a Midwest accent she told me they’d be celebrating Christmas with her grandparents, the one’s I thought were the Satanists who made her murder her own baby, the ones I thought were dead. Her words drifted off under the sound of the planes rumbling overhead. All I could do was watch her lips, glossy like fresh washed blackberries.

Mistakes

Mother stands in the empty parking lot and wails, “They’ve shaved off his mustache!” Her brother shakes her roughly by the shoulders with his strong oilfield hands; forceful like you’d wave a rug off the back porch in spring, but this is late summer. The asphalt wet under my white sandals—like carbon turning to diamonds or melting ice cream. If I sink in this tar long enough for the afternoon sun to slide behind pecan trees dividing the church from the mortuary, I’ll settle forever while she and the brothers bicker whether to send Grandfather to the grave in a suit or his work clothes, which made him recognizable.

As Mother bangs her freckled fist on the hundred plus degree car’s hood, the uncle who’d been to Korea bargains, “How could they have known an old man, who was sick for months, didn’t need a shave?”

My uncles didn’t know that the last thing their father did was to teach my mother how to make foam frothy in a chipped coffee cup, pull his frail cheek taught, drag the blade slow with his whiskers, not against.

But I knew this, and knew better than to compare his former facial hair to Hitler’s, but it’s out of my mouth in an instant, and my mother’s hot handprint across my face dislodges me from the sticky road, while a cool breeze brushes past.

Room for More

I stand before a million glassy eyes, the opaque film on each lid pulsing open, closed and open again. Soft clicks resonate inside my head as the flimsy skin slides up and down. I feel sick. Is it warm or am I feverish? The tank is immense. It grows larger each time I call it to mind. Gallons and gallons of water circulate, but there are so many fish, the water is extraneous. There are only fish, thousands of silvery catfish, with bulging eyes and long twitching whiskers.

In the Super M Asian market, I am face to face with multiple tanks, stacked from floor to ceiling. Some are filled with dinner plate-sized Dungeness crabs bouncing up and down like yo-yos, their bright orange claws tapping against the glass. Mysterious, long legs and claws, beckon like an exotic dancer with tangerine colored hair and long painted fingernails. I am hypnotized by all the movement. In another tank, dozens of lobsters dive down one side of the glass, to the others, and back. The lobsters are graceful, more than I ever imagined. I can't recall ever seeing a swimming lobster. Only with claws bound, hugging the grimy bottom of restaurant aquariums. Existing, only until don't.

Where was I before this?

As a child, I stood ankle-deep in the oily gulf coast, shoulders and nose burned the color of something that isn't as cliché as a cherry-colored crustacean. My grandfather sent me scavenging the shore with the promise of finding hollow glass balls. He told me stories about long ago Japanese fishermen using blown glass floats to mark their nets. The fishermen stopped using these floats decades ago, but Grandfather supposed there were thousands, maybe millions, floating out in the world's oceans, some lost since the late 1800s, when they were first manufactured. He assured me these floats washed up on the beaches with some regularity. He assured me one could be mine.

These glass Japanese net floats became mythical to me, an obsession. For hours, I searched each summer, hoping to find one. All I recall discovering was a dented gas can covered in sea foam and barnacles, a single lime green rubber flip flop, inhabited by a family of tiny clam-like creatures, and countless broken sand dollars. I never found a glass ball net float from Japan on the Texas Gulf coast beach.

At night, long after my grandfather had been buried, I dreamed of hollow glass orbs floating, lonely and lost in the ocean's vast expanse. Misty round globs of sea glass in frosty whites, green patinas, and azure blues—their surfaces etched cloudy from the oceans incessant waves, always just out of reach. My heart ached for childhood trips to the beach with my grandfather, and for the prospect of eventually finding a round glass float—or more accurately, for a glass float to travel across the ocean, and find me.

My grandfather never told me I was on looking on the wrong coast. The odds of something floating in the Pacific Ocean, making its way back around to the Gulf Coast, were almost astronomically impossible. No one told me the remaining glass floats were actually trapped in a cycle of North Pacific Ocean currents, bouncing back and forth like ping pong balls between the Hawaiian and the North Californian coasts. These glass balls would never, ever reach the Atlantic coast—much less the Gulf. Did my grandfather know? Had he once found one, covered in tar? Or was he just keeping a restless child out of his thinning hair for an afternoon? I had believed him. I kept looking.

And now, they are looking at me: glassy orbs, round catfish eyes. This is where I can't look away. Their pale, pink fish lips are sucking, sucking, sucking. Long whiskers, interlacing. One fish becomes another. Catfish, hundreds, are stuffed gill to gill in one large, but not large enough, tank. Their silvery bodies pressed to the glass so tightly they are unable to change their

direction. They are pressed tightly against one another, eyes always looking forward. I wonder if they feel trapped. That is how I'm feeling so I give up my search for low-carb noodles, turning away from the aquariums and the fish waiting for death.

In another world, these catfish might be living happily in a giant river. Free to mate and eat and swim. But maybe these catfish have been squashed against one another for so long they don't know there is life outside the aquarium, where one fish ends, and where another begins. I decide it is better to not watch those lobsters, frolicking and swimming. I'd rather view those poor creatures unmoving in a restaurant tank, resigned to their fate. Existing, but without any expectations.

I find replicas of the Japanese fishing net weights for sale on aisle nine. They dangle from an end cap, next to the Chinese New Year's clearance items in the large Asian market. I handle one of the clear cerulean fist-size balls, wrapped with odd macramé binding, turning it over and over in my hand before I hang the blue float back up with the others. I wish I hadn't found them. Not this way.

"Granddaddy, look, I've found one!" My pigtails, flapping in the wind, my sunburned nose, the smell of saltwater, and my grandfather, just out of reach, wading ankle-deep in the muddy ocean. He casts his line under the brilliant sky, smiles and tips his hat.

Out of the corner of my eye, from the piles of cheap, decorative net floats, and the crushed red and gold paper dragons, I can still see the fish watching me. A millions wet eyes, flickering. Winking. Letting me in on their secret.

Let Go

The mortician and county coroner were coming down the hall as I walked inside. They pushed a silver gurney with a thin charcoal covered sheet, tucked in on all four corners of the pad. Underneath was the thin skeletal frame of my grandfather, a clipboard filled with paperwork sitting on top of his still chest. One of the wheels creaked as they pushed closer to where I was standing, still holding the storm door open, my breath crystallizing in the night air.

“Son,” said the coroner, a large man wearing a long navy overcoat covering all but the tip of what looked like striped pajama bottoms, and shiny black loafers, “you’re going to have to move out of the way so Sam and I can get by.” Scrambling backward, I lost my grip on the handle, and the door slammed shut. I apologized, scrambling to re-open the door, but the man in the coat stopped me, and putting his large hand on my shoulder said, “No son, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for your loss.”

I stood on the porch, still holding the door open, and watched from the opposite side of the glass as the two men wheeled my grandfather down the curvy path of our driveway, before loading him into the back of a black station wagon. Something about the way the gurney legs folded under as they slid him in the car reminded me of the breakfast trays my mother used to serve us our pancakes. I stood there watching as the two men talked for several minutes before I realized I couldn’t hear what they were saying, and that I’d been holding the front door open the entire time. What did I hear? My mother’s previous threats, rolling like thunder in my head. All the things she’d shouted before I’d left the house that evening, before my grandfather died.

“Don’t you even think of leaving this house, Jimmy!” My mother had leaned close to my face, shrieking. Her face was as red as her hair.

“Mom, I’m going. I promised Susan I’d show her the lights around town on Christmas.”

“You can go tomorrow, or the next day.”

“But it won’t be Christmas tomorrow or the next day,” I argued.

“Your grandfather is dying!” My mother hissed.

But my grandfather had been dying. He’d been dying since they found the cancer. My mother kept saying he’d die at every holiday since, that we all had to join together as a family, for the *last time*. She’d promised it was his last Easter, his last Fourth of July, his last Thanksgiving. Last night was the last Christmas Eve, and now, it was the last Christmas.

“Don’t leave this house!” She reached out to grab my arm but I stepped aside and walked away as she continued shouting threats. I had to walk past his room to get out the front door to my car. I averted my eyes like I always did, not wanting to see my grandfather’s fragile frame, almost invisible, propped among all the ruffled throw pillows. But still my mother followed me, to the front door yelling, “Don’t you dare leave. Don’t you dare leave this house.”

I turned to her while I held the front door open. She was so furious she was shaking, tears dripped from her chin like melting icicles. She was holding on to my coat so fiercely I thought she was going to rip the sleeve right off. She opened her mouth to berate me more, but I spoke first, as calmly as I could saying, “I’m leaving to go pick Susan up. You need to let me go. Let me go! While you are at it,” I nodded towards my grandfather’s room, “you need to let him go, too.”

Wedding Dress

My mother, a firm believer in both pre-destination and revisionist history, was engaged to another man the day she eloped with my father on August 7, 1950. Both men worked on opposite shifts of the same crash crew, on the NAS Garfield Air Force base, in her small hometown in South Texas. Her fiancé, who worked on the day recovery team, sported her new high school class ring on his left pinky. David wore it for several weeks until one day, he didn't. He'd lost it, not realizing he'd let it slip off his finger at work. While pulling off an elbow-length fireman's glove, it tumbled down, deep in to one of the fingertips. It was missing for months. My mother assumed the ring was gone for good and feared it was an ominous sign.

One night, as a plane burned on the runway, my father, rushing to suit up, found the gold ring while pulling on the same glove. Mother said, "It was fate."

Later that week, my father made a trip to visit the only jeweler in town. Mr. Barnhart (who died in a suspicious gun cleaning accident twenty years later) examined the ring with care. He looked up the engraved initials on the interior of the ring, and within fifteen minutes had an address.

My father found himself on 212 Bernard Street, standing on the porch of a pale yellow, pre-civil war mansion, with ring in pocket. My mother answered the door in a smart red and white polka dotted dress and saw my father in his pressed sailor's uniform. She said, "It was love at first sight."

They were married within the week. They'd borrowed her brother's car and drove to the courthouse of an even smaller town, eighteen miles north. The justice of the peace said they'd need witnesses, so my mother went next door to a beauty shop, and convinced two ladies—still in curlers – to observe the ceremony. Sometimes, there aren't pictures to commemorate an event.

Mother said, “This is a story begging to be told.” My mother liked to tell stories. I asked her how she broke the news to the man she’d been engaged to, how she told him it was over. She said it was irrelevant.

So, my mother didn’t have a traditional wedding. Not the sort she’d wanted. The day I hesitantly accepted an engagement ring, she jumped up and down like a child. Then she immediately began acting on the plans I expect she’d made prior to my birth. There was no arguing. I was to have the wedding she’d never have. The sort of ceremony she must’ve dreamed of. A lavish ceremony she had regrets about missing, even though she’d never admit it.

Once, I heard my grandmother complaining about how much her daughter’s folly, her breaking off her engagement last minute, had cost the family. The hall refused to return the rental fee. The caterers kept the deposit. The florist wouldn’t speak to my grandmother for three years. Things like that happen in a small town.

My mother picked the date for my wedding. Not a moment sooner than six months from my engagement. “You don’t want anyone to think you are pregnant,” she insisted. She decided I would have a ceremony in late spring—a midmorning garden wedding. That way, she could show off her garden, and my father still might be sober.

She’d planned all the decorations, every last detail. My fiancé and I would stand under a white, wrought iron arch, covered with twinkling white lights, silvery tulle and fresh gardenias. I’d wear a fluffy formal wedding gown, with dramatic southern belle sleeves and a million pearl buttons; the bridesmaids, in simple sheath dresses and floppy french blue picture hats. There would be a multi-tiered cake with buttercream frosting, rice sachets to throw, and everyone—

everyone would complement her for her fine job, her impeccable vision.

I can't remember if I wore my hair up or down, and the photographs are long gone.

I was freed from my wedding dress, late one fall night. It and the veil, kept in special paper in an archival box my mother paid extra for, were reduced to unrecognizable ash in less than twenty minutes. The fire chief said it was a freak electrical fire, the blaze sparked in the garage.

The fire alarm woke me up from a deep sleep. In my dream, I was wearing a tuxedo, giving a speech in a large hotel ballroom. Everyone in the audience kept saying they couldn't hear my voice. "Speak louder! What's she saying? Can you make her out?" Then all I could hear was the piercing sound of the alarm. I lay in bed for a moment, gathering my thoughts, before adrenaline kicked in and I realized I needed to get out. I gathered what I could: my cat, my car keys. The speech would have to wait.

That night I lost many items besides the wedding dress: the photographs, Christmas ornaments, diaries, high school yearbooks, a lawnmower, and books. All those singular items that somehow organize themselves, forming the word you call home. Some of the things, I grieved for. A part of me—a large part of me—felt liberated. I was safe, my cat was safe. The dress, and everything it symbolized, was gone, trampled by the firefighters, but I was free.

Things, like people and insurance adjusters say, can be replaced. At last, I had permission to start over.

When I called to tell my mother there'd been a fire, the dress was the first thing she'd asked about. When I told her it was gone, not a shred of it left, she called me "careless." My mother pined for that wedding dress. That dress was to be kept for my daughter, to wear on her

special day. A day my mother had already planned. It didn't matter that I didn't have a daughter. She didn't have a wedding dress. I might've buried her in that gown, had she gone first.

The non-existent daughter, like my ex-husband and his new wife, were inconsequential to Mother. She'd had a long, successful marriage and took great pleasure in calling and writing to remind me. She wanted me to know just how ashamed I should be, divorced and childless. She knew it was my fault, I was selfish.

Years later, as I lay in a hospital bed, she'd dragged up the wedding gown for the millionth time. I snapped, "Mother! Didn't you think it was egotistical and selfish to dump the man you were engaged to, just weeks before your wedding?" My mother's eyes grew wide. She shook. I'm not sure if it was because I'd raised my voice or spoken harshly about her idealized past, but she cried as if she'd been slapped. Her cheeks burned.

"Did you know that the man I was engaged to, the man before your father, eventually owned of a large chain of car repair shops on the east coast and a small ski resort in Colorado? But if I hadn't married your father, you wouldn't be here." The last time she'd said this I could've sworn he'd owned a chain of restaurants. Or maybe gas stations. Maybe I misheard, it was an easy mistake. I was dying, inside and out. Maybe I failed to remember.

I had the opportunity to ask my father about his quickie marriage to my mother only twice. His response, each time, was the same, "If a jet plane goes down, with a one hundred and eighty pound man flying it," he said, "the crash crew goes out and gathers up one hundred and eighty pound worth of man, some bits no bigger than your little pinky."

Where we Went

“What did you say?”

“I said we could have everything.”

“We can have everything.”

“No, we can’t.”

- Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants”

You can call me the protagonist if you want, or the narrator. It doesn’t matter. It might not be my story to tell, but I’m going to do it. I’d said I’d never bring it up, promised even – but I was fifteen. It’s been a long time. As you would expect, things are different now. Then, our minds were set. Maybe he forgot the words I said I’d eat? Would he care it this point? I can’t keep my mouth shut. That’s why it’s my voice, my coming-of-age short story.

I’m not sure if it was my idea or impetus the first time Doug and I decided to run away. It was 1985. Doug was just enough older than me to have his driver’s license and a four-door, rust-colored Ford Granada. It looked like a piece of shit, but it seemed dependable enough.

Doug may have spurred us to leave that February morning, I can’t recall. I think I had more to run away from. My parents were always too busy screaming at each other to give me attention, and that was what I most desired, good or bad. The pink hair hadn’t worked or the extra ear piercings. Nothing made my father look up from his newspaper, or my mother from the bottle. They hadn’t wanted another child, much less another daughter.

Doug, my best friend, was one of those kids that everyone else knew was gay, even though he didn’t. Not yet. He spent the bulk of his time flipping through *International Male* clothing catalogs, thinking up crazy get-rich-schemes and the rest, professing his love for me to everyone who would listen. Except me. I don’t think we ever kissed. Goodbye once. A few hugs

here and there, but things were platonic. The only person he might have convinced of our impending marriage plans was his mother, Bernice.

Now there was a woman. She'd had four boys, all two years apart, and still somehow managed to look like a brunette version of Marilyn Monroe. She was always baking big pans of marshmallow rice crispy treats and Tollhouse cookie bars for the boys. Tall and slender, more than once she'd leaned down and touched my lips with a perfectly manicured nail and said, "You have such fair skin. You should wear bubble gum pink lipstick instead of that orangey-red color." It seemed sweet, coming from her. But I never knew what to say, averting my eyes that were drawn deep down her loose, low-cut sweaters.

Doug's dad was a Sheriff's deputy. A big man, balding, he smiled all the time. He'd swoop up Bernice in his arm with one hand, and one of her still hot cookies in the other, after his shift. "Not in front of the kids," she'd giggle. Doug's parents seemed happy enough, and I know they encouraged their kids to try new things. Why, Doug had tried and quit the clarinet, choir, track and field and ceramics class, just that first half of the school year. I mostly just skipped classes, except the ones I had with Doug. We were chemistry lab partners, and sat by each other in the computer science lab. Mostly we just hung out, trying to figure out who we were, where we were going.

Aren't kids supposed to do that? We explore, experiment, seek self-discovery. I screwed up a million times growing up, so did Doug. Big things and little: truancy, a lost shoe, overdue library books, a broken locket, torn hosiery, dropping out. Now, I think we both know who we *really* are. Wherever Doug is, I believe in my heart, he knows.

We decided we'd better pack warm clothes. It was eighty-five degrees that January in South Texas, so we thought our denim jackets and Converse high tops would protect us from the New York winter. That's right, winter, in New York. It seemed like the best place, the biggest place that two hick kids from the south could run toward. In retrospect, I'm surprised we didn't die. Thank God 7-11's sold knit caps and gloves, or we might have.

With a snap decision, we were on our way – on the road to the East Coast, armed with four peanut butter and grape jelly sandwiches and a thermos of cherry Kool-Aid. We'd spent more time picking out our music and hairstyling products than planning the actual trip. The purchase of the Rand McNally map was a pure afterthought. We had about four hundred bucks between us.

"When we get there, we'll find an agent," said Doug, taking off his Sony Walkman. "We'll find someone who can make our dream a reality and make us buttloads of money at the same time."

"Where do you get an agent?" I wondered, aloud. "I mean, where will we look?"

"In New York, stupid." He crossed his eyes. "We'll be rolling in cash advances when we tell them my idea."

"Your ice capade show?" I asked yawning, thinking it was time for him to take his turn at the wheel. I'd barely driven two hours, we weren't even close to Dallas yet, and I was tired. I hadn't had driver's ed yet, and wasn't used to driving to the corner, much less cross country.

"Hell yeah, the ice show. But not just any rinky-dink production. It's not going to be Cinderella doing figure eights out there. We'll call it 'Tragedies on Ice.'" Doug made a sweeping gesture, blocking my view of the road momentarily.

"Watch out, Doug!" I squealed, but he wasn't fazed. He only grew more animated.

“We’ll have ice skaters acting out awesome stuff. Drama, that’s what people want to see. Like plane crash reenactments and murder mysteries!”

“How about a story with an abusive family, some sort of domestic violence?” I offered, feebly. Maybe I was missing my parents. I was growing sleepier by the minute.

“Domestic violence? Yeah, yeah. That could be good.” Doug was silent for a half-second. “Yes, some guy hitting his wife, crying children. Anything. People will line up to see anything instead of that fake, sing-songy Disney crap. We’ll be rich. Rich! And we’ll never have to go back to that two-bit crap town. Never.” Doug looked smug. I could tell how pleased he was with himself, with his idea. It was classic Doug.

“Come on,” I said, with heavy-eyes. “Won’t you want to see your mom and brothers?” Doug shrugged, looking out the window. “I already kind of miss your Mom and Dad. Your mother is so pretty and a good cook. Your dad is always playing games with you and your younger brothers.” He sat silent while I drove, getting punchier. “God, Doug. I just love your family. I love how brave you are. You never seem scared. Are you afraid of anything?”

“I’m afraid of not being rich. I want to be able to take care of my parents. Being rich means you won’t be forgotten. Being rich means you can do anything you want. I can get a nose job—a nose like Tom Cruise’s—I can get my eyes lifted. I wonder if they do ass transplants?”

I didn’t have a response for Doug, so he asked, “What would you get if you were rich?”

“I don’t know what I’d do if I was rich.”

“That’s lame,” Doug replied. “What are you so afraid of?”

“I’m afraid of falling asleep at the wheel and smashing us in to the guardrail. I’m afraid I’ll die in the wreck but you won’t. And you end up hiring some squatty, clumsy, ugly ice skater to portray me in your ‘Miseries on Ice Show.’ You need to drive some, okay?”

“It’s ‘Tragedies on Ice.’ Tragedies.” Doug scowled. “And I’ll drive, already, but tell me. What are you afraid of? Come on, tell Dougie.” Doug pushed his lip out, fat, like a pouting toddler. “Tell your little friend the truth now.” Doug spoke in high pitched, comical baby talk. I couldn’t refuse him when he did that, even though he was actually mocking my faint lisp that despite several years of speech therapy seemed to leak from my lips whenever I was stressed, or tired. He stared at me, unblinking.

“I’m afraid I’m going to end up falling in love with an old lesbian, someone ten years older than me. We’ll have a bunch of cats, each named after feminists and women writers.” I couldn’t believe I’d blurted that out in my exhaustion. There was an awkward pause while Doug considered the situation. My ears were hot, and I pulled my knit cap down over them, hoping he wouldn’t notice. I babbled to break the silence, “You know, like Ms. Gertrude and Susie B. Steinem.”

“Sounds more like a wish than a fear, Sweetie,” Doug mumbled. Turning to glare at him, I hit the grooved pavement on the road’s shoulder. Inexperienced, I shrieked and just let go of the wheel. Doug reached over and calmly righted our direction, saving us from the ditch.

“Christ! I almost killed us, Doug! I’m so sorry! What would have happened if you weren’t with me?”

“Don’t be silly, you’ll have me. You’ll always have me.”

Now, I’m not going to bother writing that always-is-a-long-time dialogue you’d envision should follow in this paragraph. I’m not going to write a snappy comeback to break the tension, either—like, me telling Doug that he’d have to be the wife. No, I’ll spare you from that. If you are old enough to be reading this, you already know that nothing stays the same, no matter how

badly you want it to. Nothing is “always,” no matter how much you wish. You can’t un-break your locket; you can’t fix the run in your hose.

I’ll also avoid boring you with the cliché scenes I know you’re expecting. All the road trip antics that happen on stereotypical teenage adventures... more haphazardly driving, one kid hanging out the window laughing, one kid incapable of reading a map (Doug) and the other unable to fold it back up (me). Of course, there were the numerous detours. The pit stops. Visiting roadside attractions like the “World’s Biggest Ball of String” and “The Thing.” Go ahead, insert any 80s movie montage you can imagine here.

Whether or not we did it or not, the result is the same. Two teens, smoking cartons and cartons of cigarettes, Doug surviving on Pepsi and Mars candy bars, me surviving on anorexia. Managing to get a guy to buy us a six pack of beer outside of New Orleans. Sleeping in the car parked in grocery store parking lots, besides the highways, at truck stops. You know if you were ever that age, we didn’t have anything to fear. Why would we?

On the fifth day of our trip, Doug called his parents from a pay phone. Mine likely hadn’t noticed I was gone yet. I spent most of my time living with friends, mostly with Doug. When his mother got that look in her eye, the look all the mothers got when they are tired of dealing with the mess and mouth of a child in their house that isn’t their own, I’d move in with another friend’s family, for a few nights. It was a small town and I was low on friends. Maybe that’s why running away became such a normal thing—in my late teens—for the rest of my life.

“My dad was crying,” said Doug. “I told him we were just going to do some sight-seeing and then we’d be coming home.” Doug’s lip quivered, but I saw it. We stood outside the gas

station, me teasing my bangs in the side view mirror, while Doug re-rolled and pegged the hems of his acid washed jeans.

“Did you seriously tell your dad we were off to see the Statue of Liberty or taking in a Broadway show?” I stuck my nose in the air, rolled my eyes. “Memories,” I sang loudly and off-key. Sometimes, I just had to be an ass. I was a fifteen year old girl.

“Shut up!” Doug slapped me in the arm. “Just shut up!” My superiority faded fast, when I realized he was fighting back tears. He drove without looking my way. I searched for one of the dozens of mixed cassette tapes we’d made for the ride. One that I knew would cheer him. Yeah, thinking back on it, the road trip must’ve been all my idea.

I didn’t know then, that all of Doug’s crazy ideas, all of his funny mannerisms, were partly due to the schizophrenia he’d be diagnosed with just a couple years later. Little warning signs, like how in chemistry class everything had to be perfect—measured twice, three times, fifteen times, more—it seemed harmless, neurotic, but harmless. How everything seemed somehow increasingly tied to the book of Revelations in the *Bible*. I thought it was just a quirk that he found laundry detergent unnecessary. That he was only playing, when he claimed the neighbors were aliens from another planet who were listening to his thoughts via the soda cans, cluttering his bedroom floor. I didn’t know what to look for. I didn’t know a lot of things.

For instance, did you know the cautions on aerosol cans—the ones that say to keep them above room temperature—are genuine warnings? Did you know they’re serious? I didn’t, not until that trip to New York. We’d tossed our hair spray cans, hair mousse containers, deodorant, everything, everything in the trunk of that car. We couldn’t believe it, after that first night of freezing weather when we went to grab our toothpaste, and discovered that all the containers had

frozen and exploded in the trunk. We probably couldn't hear the popping over our Flock of Seagull's mix tape and the heater on high.

What did we do when we discovered the giant mess? We laughed. Doug wiped a frozen glob of tooth paste, seeping from its plastic seam, down the length of my nose—a blue and green minty stripe. He put three fanned out toothpaste lines under each of his eyes, down his nose. We chased each other around the car, Doug shouting, “We’re warriors!”

“Snow warriors!” I joined in. We yelled, hollered, felt so free in that instant. You know, one of those moments, when everything feels right? Like you’re going to be okay, no matter what? Like you belong, for the first time. A trunk full of shrapnel and shaving cream didn’t seem like a setback. Not even foreshadowing, to a soon-to-come climax in our not very heroic, hero’s journey.

That’s when we realized what it meant to be cold. How the wind feels blowing through your clothes, straight to your skin—when things in aerosol cans are cold enough to burst. It penetrated us, piercing us through our denim jackets, jeans, our t-shirts underneath. Snow wasn’t just powdery flakes, white glitter like you see on snowflake-covered Christmas cards. It was wet. It melted, soaking our hair, our clothes, making us even colder. We didn’t have enough money to stay in motels and we didn’t know how to drive in ice or snow—or even how to change a damn tire.

It is here, where I need to stop for a minute. To reconsider the narrative I’m feeding myself, feeding you. My memories, my dreams have become so intertwined. I am struggling to remember what *actually* happened. You know how if you tell yourself a story enough times,

even if it isn't true, in a way, it becomes true? Well, I'm not sure which details I'm forgetting, or which I told myself to remember.

I'm not sure if I miss where we went, or where we wanted to go.

I could easily spin this story as a modern coming of age story for us both. I'm sure you've read the book or at least heard about it, and I know you've seen the movie trailer. Two sexually-confused teens from a small town go to the big city, ill-prepared but squeaking by. Once there, they fall in love with their surroundings, they dash about, getting into silly messes that somehow work out okay in the end and help them feel self-actualized, help them discover who they truly are. That they are meant to pursue their dreams to be a dancer, rock star, actor, whatever.

That is of course, until some terrible, deplorable *almost* happens to them. There is an ominous drug dealer who comes after them, a sketchy con man. One of them almost dies, falls off a bridge, or gets a terminal disease. You fill in the blank. On their road trip home, they laugh and are thankful for their lesson learned. It doesn't matter where they went. They are just eager to get home, to share their transformation story with their parents and sister. They hug the dog.

But, I repeat, this is when I must stop myself as a writer. Put on the brakes. What do I really want for this climax, this dénouement? What twist can I put on this story so it isn't just a rehash of every teenage coming of age road trip story?

We stopped at a Stuckey's outside of Georgia. It was sort of a gift shop/truck stop chain that proliferated interstates back then. We ate the dollar egg and bacon special. I thumbed through the magazines. Doug brought a decorative spoon emblazoned with a map of Atlanta and

a peach. “I’m going to start a collection. We’ll hit the Stuckey’s in the states we missed on the way back, ok?”

“I thought we weren’t going back,” I countered.

“I’m going to buy a pecan roll, too.” Doug ignored me. “You want one?”

“Nah, I’m good. Get me one of those divinity rolls. A spoon collection, really?” I tried to imagine Doug living in a tidy condo with racks and racks of decorative spoons from around the country. “Maybe I’ll start a magnet collection.”

“That’s just tacky. Now a spoon collection—that’s cool.”

I’m pausing again, waiting for my muse to take over, to fill me with that odd energy that bubbles up in me, on occasion. That zone where I can push my own ego so far aside that when I go back and read what I wrote, it doesn’t seem to like my own writing. It isn’t mine any more. It’s someone else’s story, another person’s narrative.

Maybe it is the voice of my grandmother, who insisted on writing all of my junior high book reports and creative writing lessons. “What sort of stories do you have to tell? You’re only eleven,” she’d snort.

Well, bring it on, Grandma, because I’ve written myself into a corner, a tight spot. I don’t seem to be able to find the words, the right words. Keep writing, ‘they’ say. Write through it. So I suck down my coffee, pace around my living room, go outside and smoke a cigarette. I should probably go to the grocery store, start a load of laundry. Anything, but keep at this nagging memory, this story I don’t want to capture, because when I fully remember it, when I get it on paper, what if it is true?

In an even colder state, I don't remember which one, the tire went flat. Remember how I mentioned the tire before, and how neither of us knew how to change one? That's right, the tire. Doug and I stood shivering in the cold, trying to figure out how to assemble the jack. I kicked at the rim, cursing our luck. *But the tire had to go flat.* What was it Chekhov wrote—something about how if there is a gun in a story, it must eventually go off? Well, in this case, the tire was our gun, and it needed to go flat. Your protagonist, your narrator, whatever—she was stuck on the side of a very cold, very desolate road.

After a half hour of screwing around with the jack, we gave up trying to fix the tire and instead, hopped up and down on the side of the road, hoping to keep warm while flagging down a truck driver who would stop and rescue us. This was before cell phones, and we didn't know how far we might have to walk. Neither of us could remember the name of the last town we passed through, so we weren't sure how far away we were from a gas station. It was so cold, especially for two kids who weren't used to winters away from the Gulf Coast.

"Do you think LaToya Jackson and Michael Jackson aren't different people? What if they are the same person?" Doug asked, walking along the side of the road, following the shoulder's white line, like a tight rope. Tiny snowflakes sparkled in his hair in the dying afternoon light.

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it. Give me a minute." It wasn't a peculiar question, coming from Doug, but it did seem out of place. I guess he was trying to distract me from the possibility we might freeze to death that night.

"Well, you never see them together, right?"

I begin to think Doug might just have a point. I began to prepare my argument, my debate strategy. "What if it's Janet," I countered, "instead of LaToya?"

But Doug had moved on. He'd spotted lights in the distance and started whooping.

"Finally, here comes Prince Charming!" Doug jumped up and down, pogoing, a punk rock song probably bouncing about in his head. I felt relieved and continued planning my Janet Jackson conspiracy argument.

The van almost slid to a stop. "Must be the ice," Doug mused.

His "prince" turned out to be an old white guy in a brown Econoline van. He wore a black knit cap and was missing an incisor. I could see the gaping hole when he said the word, "gas."

"No, we didn't run out," answered Doug. "It's the tire. Can you help us change it?"

"It's too dark," the man said. He sounded friendly enough. He *was* smiling. "I don't have a flash light. How 'bout I drive you to the police station in the next town. It's about fifteen minutes from here. They'll bring you kids back, and I bet they'll change your tire for free."

Doug already had his hand on the sliding side door. "Sounds great, we're freezing out here."

This is the part where I should've said, "No thanks. I'll wait here with the car until you come back." Or, "I'll just figure out how to assemble the jack, and then I can change the tire myself." This is where I wished I'd had the logic, the experience an adult would have had in this sort of situation. I was fifteen, hadn't I ever seen a movie? But it was cold, so cold. It was all I could consider.

I want to write something else. I want the truth to be that I stayed behind, but instead, I followed Doug. He reached out his hand and pulled me in to the heated van.

At first the warmth of the van felt good. Our fingers, our noses were numb, tingling. We were cold and tired and ready for some adults to step in. To come to our aid, the assistance we didn't think we needed, but were really quite desperate for. But of course, we weren't rescued by a Good Samaritan. What sort of story would this be, if the van driver really took us to the police station and everything turned out peachy?

The driver was on us in an instant. I scratched at the sides of the van, in the dark, for the handles, for a way to get out. The interior lights were out and I could hear Doug shrieking. I didn't know then that those sort of vans really existed, vehicles where the driver had removed the interior handles, where you couldn't get out unless your captor let you out. Of all the ways to find out, I wish it hadn't been that way.

Doug and I were locked in, and the grandfatherly man driving the van wasn't alone. He needed someone to hold Doug at knife point while they took turns raping me, and then Doug. Someone had me by my neck, by my locket chain. Like a tight rope. I could hear the rings of each necklace link snapping, one after the other, so close to my ears, and then I heard the clink of metal on metal. One of the predators threw my necklace, my childhood locket, at the side of the van's interior. And then it was rough hands, ripping at my ribbed stockings, yanking at my sweater skirt, scratching my thighs apart. I thought of Doug's spoon collection, hundreds of spoons, polished to a high gloss, hanging perfectly straight, in alphabetical order. Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas...

So, I guess you know now, where we went, didn't matter. We never made it to New York. That van marked the end of the road trip for us, the end of the fun, the end of sleeping soundly. The end of my childhood invincibility, the end of not looking over my shoulder twice,

three times in parking garages, but not the end of that nagging feeling that I should've just gone to school that morning. I should have never, ever dragged Doug in to this mess.

I woke up, with a pounding headache, a bloody wetness between my thighs. The younger man was on top of Doug, who'd stopped whimpering, crying for his mother, sometime last night, when it was still dark. We'd lost track of time, we thought we were going to die. Like magician's doves, tucked in a velvet sack, we stayed still, resigned to our fate.

Still, between the being hit, being raped, I memorized the men's faces, each line, each hair on their chin, their eye color, each distinguishing mark. I listened to their voices, tried to figure out what part of the country they were from, tried to feel the numbness, the freezing cold I had felt on the side of the road with Doug, and not the burning sensation I felt everywhere now, not the hot, alcoholic breath on the back of my neck.

I even managed to memorize the license plate when we ran, squeezing out the passenger door window. We scrambled, screaming for help at the gas station, when both of our predators stupidly stepped out of the car, thinking Doug and I were asleep, not just pretending. We didn't know where we were, but we didn't notice the cold anymore, just how hoarse our voices were, as we begged for someone, anyone to call the police.

Here's something you might not expect. When the cops came, what we thought would be our rescue, they put Doug and I in jail, in separate cells. We were runaways.

As soon as they asked, the first opportunity I had, I told the detective who interviewed me every detail, everything, the chronology. I said, "They attacked me first, and then Doug."

"That doesn't match your friend's story," said the detective. "Your stories don't match at all. He said you two were hitchhiking, and that you thought one of the guys that stopped was

attractive—college guys, from Georgia State,” the cop said, looking at his notepad. “Your friend said he drank beer with one of the guys, while you had fun with the other. He said the sex was consensual.”

Why would Doug say that? Wasn't he going to be there for me, always? I didn't know what to say, so the police assumed we were both lying. I got a Band-Aid for the cut on my face, a Ziploc bag of ice to hold on my bruises, and a morning-after pill. That was supposed to patch things up, until our parents got there. I didn't even know where “there” was. I wondered how long I'd sit in that jail cell, what that pill was doing to my insides, and mostly, if things would ever be okay again. I wanted someone to tell me that things would go back to how they were before, that everything would be fine again, soon. Bombshell, things weren't.

I caught a glimpse of Doug and his mother as they were leaving the jail. Bernice held up her hand to wave at me at me with a faint, uncomfortable smile on her face. I told myself the look on her face was concern, love even, as my father shoved me towards the car. Doug's mother had thought to bring him a heavy coat. But he was limping, lost his shoe. His father sat in the passenger seat of the car, looking at his lap, reading a book, I guessed. I only saw the back of Doug's head. He probably couldn't turn to look for me, with Bernice's heavy, coat-covered arm, draped around his shoulder.

I remember how icy my father's eyes were when he met me in the police station lobby. Holding the few items I had left in a brown paper bag, I stood shivering. I was dirty, tired and my father didn't notice my transformation. There certainly wasn't any running into his arms, no being swung about like a small child, no comfort. If my thighs weren't still aching, bruised, I might've run the other direction, wherever I was.

My father wasn't happy to see me, and my mother didn't even bother to show up. She might've not even been aware that my father had taken off from work, driven three states away to pick me up. No, all that there was, all that I got, was my father's all too transparent disappointment. His four hissed words, serving as our conversation for the entire ride back. "You are foolish, child."

Toe Socks

It was the summer of rainbow-striped acrylic toe socks. Itchy and knee high, they were “what all the kids are wearing,” according our grandmother. But Susan wasn’t about to take fashion advice from the old woman. She was sixteen and wore soft brown chukka boots. They were new, and that afternoon when she pulled them on, her only thoughts were how much she loved the boots, how they smelled, how easily the left toe slid under her motorcycle’s shifter. She didn’t know as she double knotted them it would be last time she’d wear them. Didn’t know she was about to spend six weeks in a hospital with a shattered pelvis, a broken femur, or that she’d spend a year relearning to walk. How could she know in that instant, that for the rest of her life, her heart would race at intersections with unprotected left-hand turns? Or how vexed she’d feel when people complained, “I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck!” when she had?

She told me that she woke up two days after the accident to the smell of rubbing alcohol, scratchy sheets and the sound of crying. Despite immense pain and her face too swollen to open her eyes, she recognized the voice. Our mother, was talking loudly between sobs to our aunt, “Who’ll ever marry her now? Why, she’ll never even be able to wear sandals. How will she ever go to the beach? She’s ruined, just ruined.” But it wasn’t the first time our mother had said that. It wasn’t the last.

“I tried to fake out the doctor,” Susan said. “When they asked if I could feel the stick of their pen on the sole of my foot, I lied.” But she couldn’t stop her toes from turning gangrenous. Rubbing alcohol didn’t disguise the smell.

“Gran is coming to see you this afternoon. Let me braid your hair.” But even brushing Susan’s hair made her wince.

“Everything hurts,” said Susan, but she tried to be stoic. Our grandmother didn’t. She carried on louder than our mother when she walked in the room.

“My poor granddaughter! Crippled! I could kill your father for buying you that motorcycle. What was he thinking? What was your mother thinking? You were so perfect, but you had to go and ruin it all,” said Gran.

Weeks later, Susan left the hospital in a wheelchair. She eventually moved from crutches to a cane. After a year, she bought a new motorcycle with the insurance settlement, even though Mother said she’d better not.

Susan saved some of the keepsakes from her hospital stay in a large plastic tub that she kept in the back of her closet. In the container are pressed flowers, hundreds of get-well-soon cards from the other kids in our high school, her hospital wristband and a small gift box, with a faded tag that reads, “From Grandmother.”

In the box was a pair of rainbow-striped toe socks, as bright as they were when they were new, one with all five different-colored knit toes intact—and its mate—which Gran had carefully cut off each toe, and darned the end closed.

Lucille

Spring up like toast, hot and crusty. Shake your bony fingers at the day. Unlatch your door Lucille, let me in. Begin your litany of demands.

Lucille stands in a pale blue sleeveless gown, arms bruised as berries. Her lips are thick and greasy as a side of sausage, a thin cigarillo clenched between her coffee-stained teeth. “It’s about time you showed up.” She waves me in and lets go of the screen door. The hollow wood echoing as it catches my right ankle. “You’ll be faster, next time,” she said.

It was my first year in the city. I’d moved to Austin to go to The University of Texas, it seemed like a good idea at the time. It was still an easy college to get into, and it seemed much farther than the two and a half hours it was from what I then thought was home. I knew I needed to get involved with the community—an attractive counselor named Jean told me this, she suggested Meals on Wheels, but I said I wanted more.

There was another program, “Groceries to Go.” It was much more hands on and sounded perfect. I’d be assigned a still-mobile elderly person of the gender of my choice, and once a week I’d take him or her grocery shopping.

I only remember a few bullet points from the orientation. The exasperated social worker who led the training said we were under no circumstances to buy things for our elderly pals with our own money. We were encouraged to help them spend their food stamp money wisely. The social worker suggested keeping tight boundaries. But my boundaries went out the window when I met Lucille.

Lucille could've been a line-backer. Even humped over at sixty-five, she was a sound six-foot-four and she probably weighed 300 pounds. But I was barely eighteen, and she seemed decrepit. Lucille, her silvery hair piled on top of her head, her head, covered with an exotic scarf. She wore silvery eye shadow that emphasized her sky blue eyes and dark plum colored lipstick that emphasized her mouth, which was unusually large, her lips the size of a deck of cards. She dressed like a gypsy and gestured wildly.

"Try not to be late next time, will you?" Those were her first words to me. I didn't realize I'd been late. I was twenty minutes early, circling the block twice—not seeing the tiny efficiency house, a cottage really, with paper thin walls and no air conditioning. It was my first realization that people lived like this in America, not just in third world countries.

It was the end of August and sweat gathered between my foot and rubber flip flop. I stood awkwardly in her entry way, as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. Chiquita, her fat chihuahua barked and nipped at me. "I'm still glad you got here when you did," said Lucille. "There's a dead rat in the kitchen and I need you to take care of it." I was naïve, and this was her test.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, and followed her into the tiny living room. Books lined every wall, the occult, runes, divination, astrology. There were crystals, exotic tapestries, mirrors, and a big black Nordic rat, good and dead in the pantry, bare, save for a can of salt-free green beans. The rat's yellow teeth were exposed, and it had died among the rubble of a broken cup and saucer. I pulled a soggy tissue from my jean shorts and picked up the stiff corpse by its pink tail. Then Lucille told me she needed me to drive her to the liquor store. She was out of gin and smokes and needed to borrow five bucks, and again, I said, "yes."

Lucille called me, night and day. It was before Caller ID, so I'd say, hello—it might've been an emergency—but no, it's Lucille. "Yes, no. I can't come over just now. No, I'm busy.

Well, maybe this afternoon. Okay, this morning,” I said while hanging up the phone. She’d cast some sort of spell over me. I couldn’t say no.

Lucille met me at the door half-dressed, promising she’d read me my fortune. She pulled out stacks of tarot cards, all wrapped in the elegant scarves, similar to the ones she always wore on her head. She told me to pick a deck. Chiquita sat by her feet, eating the chicken and vegetables the Meals on Wheels driver delivered just before I arrived.

Lucille shuffled the cards and proceeded to tell me what I should’ve known, what anyone knows who looks at a scrawny eighteen year girl from a crappy little town in rural South Texas. She told me I had growing to do, lessons to learn, that my car needed an oil change and that I’d experience loss. “You’ll have days when you’re lonely and you should avoid excess sugar,” said Lucille. “It’s easier to keep from getting fat than to lose weight.” Lucille did all the talking, and I did all the listening.

One day, Lucille stopped looking at the cards and looked at me. She must’ve felt sorry for me, all of a sudden. I was a sympathetic character in my youth. She softened her expression and pushed away the cards covered with swords and cups. “Sweetie, I think you’ve got a story to tell, your life is fascinating. You start writing it down. People will read it, I’ll read it,” said Lucille, “Now let’s go to Whole Foods. I need a high quality, extra virgin olive oil. Do you know about olive oil? She was a skinny girl who dated Popeye. Come on, now. Where are your keys?”

One of the last times I saw Lucille, a nurse let me in. Lucille was in her bedroom, struggling as another nurse tried to pull a big flowered house-dress over her head. “Your grandmother’s blood pressure is too high,” the nurse told me, her tone abrupt. She thought I was her young granddaughter, a terrible relative who let an old lady live in this dump with not

enough food and inadequate health care. Her scolding was wasted on me. I probably shrugged, trying to talk only to Lucille. But she wasn't lucid. "It's the lithium," said the nurse, the one with the mean pig-eyes.

I can't remember if Lucille ever called me after that. I don't know if she went to the hospital, or moved to Florida, but I never went back. I probably met a girl in one of my classes that held my attention more than volunteering, or maybe I moved and forgot to give Lucille my new number.

Lucille must be dead now, and the sad part is, I don't even remember her last name. I just remember Lucille.

Lucille continues to mistake her son's urn with her ashtray and says, "I should put a lid on that thing." She smirks and stirs his ashes like cream. "Who would have guessed I'd have outlived them all?" she tells me, adjusting her scarf. "Not me, a gal who traded fat men their fortunes for drinks."

Lucille shoves me to the door with a list of wishes too long for her budget and my spare time. She shuts the door without saying goodbye. She clears me away like the dishes.

Don't Know No Better

In my nightstand you'll find prescription sleeping pills, a half-empty bottle of aspirin, unopened multi-vitamins, lip balm, cracker crumbs and cracked heel cream. In the same drawer are used tissues, a crumpled unpaid phone bill, and a photo of my oldest childhood friend, Clara Lee Tucker. In the snapshot she is twelve-years-old, pretending to drink from a bottle of Pearl Beer, her head, tilted all the way back. This is how I like to remember her, wearing a white t-shirt, her blonde hair in thick braids, the bottle cap, millimeters from her big front teeth.

Books line my nightstand drawers, and between their pages are things I've saved. Stuffed in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, a ticket stub from a long-gone amusement park, a pressed rose from an old boyfriend's boutonniere, and a Polaroid of me at a junior high dance that has worn away to all but a ghost-like shadow on thinner-than-skin film, held together only by half the tin and plastic edges of the snap shot. It's been a bad habit, tucking things away for safe-keeping in books—the spines grow weak, the covers bulge. Mementos often inadvertently end up in boxes bound for the Salvation Army.

Sandwiched between the pages of my misshapen copy of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, is a small swatch of hand-tatted, black lace and a faded pale blue envelope, both from Clara. Impeccable cursive swirls across the linen envelope, her words written in purple ink that read, "Keep sealed. Open only in the event of my death." The word "only" is underlined three times. I've meant to tuck her picture in with her the lace and letter, but instead I've left her face floating in my drawer, along with the spare change and out of date postage stamps.

In a way, Clara and I were forced to be friends. Our mothers registered us for Mrs. Raider's Kindergarten, the only kindergarten available in the small town of Bramble, Texas. Mrs. Raider, a short, rotund widow with black hair teased to the sky, was known for her no-

nonsense attitude and success prepping children for elementary school. She was a master at teaching fidgety children how to stay seated, a gifted tutor in tying shoes. She ran the school out of the same one-story, ranch-style home she lived in, the second-to-last house on the right side of Lincoln Street. My mother wasn't big on preparations, so she told me I was going to "Big Girl School" just minutes before the first day of class was to begin. My response was to throw myself down on the teacher's front steps and cling to my mother's leg. As I begged her not to leave me, she shook her head and said, "You've dirtied your sundress."

I'm not sure I remember the embarrassment on my mother's ruddy face or if I merely recall her revised version of my first experience of school, my mother standing on the kindergarten steps, in the early morning light. She peeled me off like the rubber gloves she used to wash dishes. She pushed me through Mrs. Raider's open screen door as the old teacher assured her I'd settle down after she left, so my mother could go about her half-morning without feeling any pangs of guilt. While my mother walked away, Mrs. Raider realized I would continue to wail. She shoved me by the criss-crossed straps of my sundress back to the non-school portion of her house where she shut me in a spare bathroom. She told me I would stay there until I could be well-behaved—until I knew better than to carry on when my mother dropped me off.

What realtors would call a half-bath, Mrs. Raider called her powder room. It consisted of a pedestal sink and a toilet, crowded in to a room even a small child would perceive as tiny. The walls were covered in a bismuth pink tile, the toilet was pastel green and the toilet paper was yellow as a legal pad. Above the frameless mirror was a small embroidered sign, bordered by blue and pink tulips that read, "The soul is healed by being with children."

My first thought was to kick the door repeatedly with my new shiny leather shoes, but, afraid of what my mother would do if I scuffed them, I sat down on the shaggy bath mat and

continued crying. Before it was time for my mother to pick me up, Mrs. Raider roughly washed my face with a scratchy, brown wash cloth as sour as her mood, before releasing me from her jail cell. I compliantly ate a handful of vanilla wafers while I waited with the other children in the play room for our mothers to come pick us up. I didn't start crying again until I heard the familiar honk of my mother's red Volkswagen Bug.

The second day of kindergarten I pitched another fit when my mother left. Mrs. Raider wasted little time banishing me to her bathroom in the back of the house. I didn't have much time to notice, but Clara, watching from the screen door, noticed me. The next morning, after my mother dragged me dangling by one arm inside, Clara took hold of my other arm, held my hand and led me away. As the kindergarten teacher assured my mortified mother I was normal, Clara grinned and said, "Come with me. I've got something to show you."

Clara assured me when the day was over we'd fly to Hawaii in her mother's helicopter. She told me about her pet lion that only ate shrimp cocktail. Convinced me I'd have much more fun if I didn't cry. She spent the bulk of that third morning distracting me with silly faces and games to make sure I didn't. Years later, she told me her older brother Houston warned her to be good for Mrs. Raider. He had spent the first two weeks of kindergarten locked in Mrs. Raider's powder room. Who knows how many days of staring at the pink ceramic wall she'd spared me?

From then on, Clara and I were pals—my best friend. We shared a love of canned chocolate pudding, had the same initials and both had long blonde braids tied with fat colored yarn. We could have been sisters—the same pointy nose, blue eyes, and pale freckled skin. We both played with Barbie dolls and Easy Bake Ovens. Both our mothers went to the same high school we'd eventually end up attending, and both married our fathers before they were nineteen.

Our fathers had been in the Navy and both always wore white undershirts under their work shirts.

Clara's family ran the Bramble Antique Store. My mother called it the "Bramble Junk Yard." My mother said it was tacky to eat white rice and that it was ridiculous that the Tucker's called their only son "Bubba." Clara's mother thought my parents were hillbillies, eating white gravy instead of brown. She told Clara that my mother's lipstick was too red and that she shouldn't have let me have pierced ears until I was in high school.

Neither of our families had air conditioning and both our houses were east of the town's library, the line indicating the poor side of town. Our parents never went to college and had never been out of the country. At our kindergarten Halloween party, Clara's mother sent her dressed as an "Indian" complete with a feather in her hair and a tan dress with fringed edges, and mine sent me dressed as a "Gypsy." Clara still had photos from the party and pulled them out for me to see when I visited her after she had her first baby, Greg, Jr. Holding the photos in one hand, she jiggled her son on her knee, her blonde hair still long and braided. Clara said, "Our mothers didn't know no better, they was just ignorant trash." We laughed at her mockery of the mothers who'd disowned us. What else could we do?

I survived kindergarten, and ultimately public school in Bramble Independent School District. When I was in junior high, I confided to my mother about cruel Mrs. Raider, but she brushed it off. "Mrs. Raider didn't know she wasn't supposed to lock children in the bathroom. It's just that simple." Ignorance was a plausible excuse in my family. And by then, I knew I needed to b-e-h-a-v-e, a three syllable word in my home.

Clara and I did our best to grow apart as we grew older, but it was a daunting job in a small town. We were still in the same classes, the same clubs—we just weren't best friends. By

the time we graduated high school, I knew Clara had grown to think her family was better than mine. It wasn't anything she said, but something about the way she looked at me. I saw it in her eyes when we exchanged our graduation invitations—mine flat on white linen, instead of embossed on ivory, like hers. I felt self-conscious, in my bright pink lipstick, heavily lined eyes and dangling earrings. Clara's mother told her I was "easy." We both knew her mother was right.

Clara and I both grew up to become deep disappointments to our mothers. At eighteen, Clara married a Mexican and took his surname, Hernandez, without hesitation. Her parents refused to speak to her the first ten years of her marriage or to acknowledge her three children. Her mother's active avoidance of Clara and her own family was challenging. Clara worked part-time as a cashier at the Super D, the only grocery store in town. Her parents had to frequent the store or drive sixty-five miles to the closest town. Clara's mother started speaking to her again because, "the cash register didn't ring up the sales price on her Mylanta and Mama couldn't help arguing over a nickel." Now her mother visits and spends time with her grandchildren, but still gripes about Clara's husband, Junior, and constantly reminds her "she was raised to know better."

I married my first husband when I was eighteen, too. My mother is still "sick to death" because I was the first person in the whole history of our family to get a divorce and worse yet, *that* divorce was only my first. My mother claimed she was upset because she wanted my life to be "easy." Truth is she didn't want to be embarrassed, again. My mother always worried what people might think. When I told her Dale and I were finished, she averted her eyes and in the same cool voice repeated words I've heard a thousand times since I first moved away, "I have to live here, you know?"

I moved away from Bramble the first chance and first husband I had. I was always running from home, but I didn't run far. I lived in Houston, San Antonio and Dallas, eventually choosing Austin over my ancestral home. I forsook my stake in the family home to my brother, and moved into a condo after my third marriage ended. I was jealous of Clara, fifteen years later and still married to Junior, her oldest daughter crowned Little Miss Bramble at the Bramble County Fair, and her home and livestock quadrupled in value. She kept her great grandmother's wedding dress hanging in an antique cherry chifforobe, a great uncle's upright grand piano in her entry way, and a collection of handmade tapestries in drawers Junior had custom-built. I had tax returns I couldn't locate, a silver-striped cat that managed fine without me, and a bookcase from IKEA I never assembled, still in the box gathering dust.

Living two hundred and eighty miles apart, we don't see each other as often as we would like, but Clara and I exchange email several times a week. "You're my dearest friend and you live so far away. That's sad, isn't it?" She writes in an email, the subject "lonesome." But I'm the one eating food from a drive thru on my thirty-minute commute to an empty house. All these years later, and she's still trying to make me feel better.

I only see her every few years, usually when someone dies—but there are fewer and fewer funerals left to attend. I didn't bother to attend our kindergarten teacher's funeral. Clara went to Mrs. Raider's viewing, and gleefully reported back to me the old woman was "all kinds of fat squeezed into the casket," and they'd buried her with her hair parted crooked, wearing bright orange lipstick and a white flannel nightgown covered with tiny pink roses alternating with horizontal stripes. This led Clara to suspect Randall Billson, the local mortician two years our junior, likely spent a few days locked in the old bat's bathroom, too.

On my birthdays, Clara calls me, and it is always the same conversation. She calls at six a.m. sharp, because no “decent lady” would be up at midnight. That is my cue to complain about the time, reminding her I’m no “lady.”

“You need to move back here,” she’ll drawl, “back where your kin is, while there still is any. It’s not right for you to be up there in all that traffic. I know you can’t even see the stars at night. Don’t you miss the stars?”

I ponder her question and decide she is experiencing transference, like my therapist says, so I answer her question with, “I miss you.”

She tries to tease me, “You’ll move back here someday, either by choice or your grandchildren will dump you down here. But don’t worry, it’ll be okay. We’ll sit in my porch rockers. Junior will be dead by then and we’ll eat chocolate pudding for every meal, because we want to, not just because we won’t have any teeth left.”

I wish it was true, but while I’ve been wasting time, she’s planted herself in Bramble and propagated a beautiful home, lengthy marriage and successful children. I’m still renting, have less than a thousand dollars in the bank and it is too late for me to have grandchildren, or even children of my own. Before I can argue with her, she bursts into a quick song of “Happy Birthday” says, “Love you, darlin’” and hangs up the phone. I’m left holding the receiver to my heart, thanking the creator for bringing her into my life.

Last year I drove down to Bramble for Clara’s birthday, a surprise party. Junior asked me to help with the planning, even though since he found out I had a tattoo, he thought I was a bad influence. I spent an afternoon inviting guests, shouting into the phone at her friends from the Sassy Stitchers Quilt Guild. Most of the women are closer in age to our mothers.

While Junior took Clara to the feed store to look at the spring selection of fancy chickens, her daughters let me in the house to help decorate. Sarah and Emily inflated balloons and hung streamers while I arranged the milk glass cake plates and poured lemon-lime soda over mounds of orange sherbet in Clara's mid-century punch bowl. I ushered in guests while her son Greg finished hanging the last banner. When we yelled surprise, Clara blushed and apologized for her spotless house being "messy" but she quickly recovered, pushed some ornate chairs out of the way and insisted everyone square dance. I grew dizzy, turning clumsily in circles, out of step with the music as Clara sent me spinning.

After everyone left, we sat on her blue velvet love seat and enjoyed what was left of the cake. Clara only ate the frosting while I drank coffee, to keep me awake on the drive back. She told me that she had big news. Her daughter Emily was pregnant with a girl, Clara's first grandchild. She and her husband Dave were going to name the baby after her, Clara Lee. Clara knew me well enough to know my congratulations were bitter sweet and saved the news for right after she thanked me for coming, and before I pulled my keys out of my black leather purse. She patted me on the shoulder as I stood by her on the front porch preparing to leave and said, "Oh sweetie, everyone thinks they want what they don't have. You don't think there are times when I wish I only had your condo-sized floors to mop and that crazy lifestyle of yours? Why you could just up and move to Alaska if you wanted to! You don't have all this mess clipping your wings." I kissed her on the cheek, waved goodbye and on my two and a half hour drive back to Austin, cried like the first day I was dropped off at Mrs. Raider's kindergarten.

Some nights when I am digging for some lotion or a peppermint in the deep drawers of my not-really-antique-but-made-to-look-so nightstand, my eyes fall on the cover of that Virginia Woolf book. I think of the writer, filling her overcoat pockets with rocks, walking into the waters

and not turning back, and then I think of Clara—just as resolute, but instead fiercely staying alive, holding on to what is hers, no matter what the cost. I look at Clara’s sealed letter and wish it wasn’t what it is, that I didn’t know what’s inside, that instead it’s a childhood pact, a diary entry, anything that it isn’t my oldest friend’s possible self-fulfilling prophecy.

Clara gave me the envelope a few months after she married Junior. She was convinced that her husband, an upstanding member of the Bramble sheriff’s department, was going to kill her. She told me that when he blew her brains out, all over the Texas star-patterned bedspread she made when she first learned to quilt, it was my job to tell the sheriff it was him, to hand deliver her letter as absolute proof of his guilt—so they’d know it wasn’t a gun-cleaning accident, a bungled robbery, or worse, her taking what she refers to as “the easy way out.” In the whole time they’ve been married, I’ve never seen a bruise on her, never heard Junior raise his voice, but I’ve kept her letter, just in case.

Sometimes, when I reach for my nail clippers, a notepad or something else that singularly doesn’t mean much, but in a box full of other items becomes a person’s life belongings, I look at the envelope, holding it up to the light, wondering what she’s written and if she still carries this burden today—the fear she’ll become a Texas Department of Criminal Justice statistic and front page news in the *Bramble Times-Picayune*.

Tonight isn’t either of our birthdays, but I’m calling her, holding on to the phone for dear life. Clara answers, with obvious surprise in her voice, despite the caller I.D. It’s late, but I just glanced at her letter, like I do almost every night when I’m looking for my face cream, and tonight I can’t stand it. I tell her which drawer to find it, if she wants to get it, to take back all those words. She breathes out several upbeat, “Hmmm’s,” “I see’s” and “Yes, ma’am’s.” I can hear Junior, whispering in the background, wanting to know who is calling her after eight

o'clock. Her voice is sleepy, syrupy. She asks, "Have you been drinking, honey?" I offer her a sloppy good night before putting the phone back in its cradle, before washing down my sleeping pills with the rest of the bottle of merlot, honestly wishing I knew better.

Vita

Laura L. Stubbins was born in Beeville, Texas where she graduated from A.C. Jones High School a year early in the spring of 1988. While pursuing her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology at St. Edward's University, she worked at the Austin-American Statesman newspaper where she performed voice-over work and wrote daily newsletters on various topics for a subscription service before being promoted to a position in the marketing department. In the fall of 2008, Laura enrolled in The University of Texas at El Paso. While pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, she worked full-time as a membership director for a lobbying trade association for independent oil and gas producers in Austin, Texas until February of 2012. Laura's work is published in *Sorin Oak Review Journal*, *BorderSenses*, and is forthcoming in *Fire Point* and other publications.

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This thesis was typed by Laura L. Stubbins.