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Shooting Scars: A True Story (More or Less)

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SHOOTING SCARS: A TRUE STORY

(MORE OR LESS)

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DEDICATION

To my parents, my brother, and my children (to whom I apologize for their lineage).

And to Julie, who dealt with it and me.

SHOOTING SCARS: A TRUE STORY

(MORE OR LESS)

by

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THESIS

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PREFACE

"It matters that there are holes in a family history that can never be filled, that there are secrets and mysteries, migrations and invasions and murky blood-lines. In this way we speak of human history."
— Eleni Sikelianos, *The Book of Jon*

During her last psychiatric commitment, my mother said to her doctor (who described her as "hyper verbal," "fragmented," and "rambling"), "I can't help you. I don't offer any information. I have no idea what I'm talking about except my dreams. I will not share the information because it is my property and I will not tell you that."

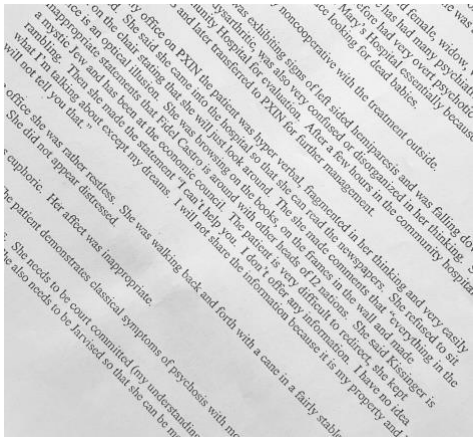
Figure 1. Psychiatric records, 2001.

She died just months later, in December 2001. The following October, 2002, my father died. Their deaths were sudden and, largely, unexpected at the time they occurred. When my parents died, I was just getting my bearings as an adult. I was married, was getting a career off the ground, and had two young children. In fact, my daughter was born two months after Mom's death. And most of the information Mom refused to share with her psychiatrist, she took to the grave with her, leaving me to piece together what information I could about her life from the shards that remained. Dad was not much better.

At the time of their deaths, I had been financially supporting both of my parents, but I had also spent more than a decade trying to distance—and differentiate—myself from them. In essence, I bought them off: money in exchange for distance. I thought I was doing everything I could to avoid becoming like them. What it ultimately meant is that my parents died largely unqueried by me, and now, looking back, it is clear to me that I am more like them then I would

have hoped or guessed. How did this happen? Why couldn't I avoid the pitfalls that my parents had created for me? What about my own children?

I was motivated to write this work as an attempt to explore these questions, my parents' lives, and the effects they had on my own. These initial hundred and thirty (or so) pages of work deal primarily with my parents and my relationship with them as well, to a lesser extent, with my brother. I intend to continue this work and expand it to include more regarding my own adult life, exploring my own mistakes, my motivations in making them, and reflecting upon them in the context of being a father

While I wouldn't say we were necessarily "poor"—there was always a roof and food of some kind—my family was well below middle class on the socioeconomic continuum. Neither of my parents attended high school, although they both went on to earn diplomas as adults in their respective institutions: Mom while committed to the Iowa state hospital and Dad while in prison. Dad was a skilled laborer, but his earnings were stretched thinner than a threadbare sheet when it came to supporting a family of four. Mom, for the most part, could not work. Her mental health largely prevented her from being successful in any job she had. After my parents were divorced, she (and we, when we lived with her) subsisted on monthly SSI checks and occasional AFDC payments. Their (and our) relative poverty meant that there were few family artifacts I could refer back to as I write: few photos, no journals or heirlooms, no family home, etc.

Thus, although I have my own observations with respect to my immediate family's history, I was left with far more "holes" (Sikelianos) than information when it came to examining just where it is that I come from and the role that my family had in making me who I am today. I am especially interested in my parents in the years before I was born. As with her psychiatrist, my mother shared little information with me, and unfortunately, I had not asked

before she died. What I did glean from her about her life before meeting my Dad or having children was often cryptic or merely hinted at. Moreover, as one may readily surmise, Mom was an extremely unreliable narrator of her own life.

As for my father, all of his stories largely centered on himself and, almost always, painted himself in the best light. Much of it was simply braggadocio, which, of course, renders him largely unreliable as a narrator, as well. Dad's selectivity in the stories he chose to recount, and his unwillingness to paint himself in a negative light, meant that I was left with little information regarding pivotal periods in his life, such as his abandonment of his first wife and two young daughters in North Carolina. His eldest daughter reconnected with him later in life, but other than one or two conversations over the course of four decades, his younger daughter never spoke with him again. From Dad's perspective, this made her the bad actor. And this is only one example that I'm aware of Dad not being forthcoming when he was the wrongdoer.

Then, of course, there's me. I struggled with writing this because I suffer from my own reluctance to not be the hero of my own story. I also don't want to be a victim. As a child and even a young adult, I worshipped my father as a hero. And well into my adult life, I was an apologist for him, repeating many of the excuses or explanations he had used for committing immoral and criminal acts. This, I think, was largely because I felt a need to hang onto some aspect of my childhood as being true, that the father I knew as a child was not actually the criminal that he was. In a way, I think, my willingness to ignore Dad's narcissism led to narcissistic behavior on my own part: I sought attention and pleasure at the expense of others and did everything I could to be perceived as a success or as a hero, even in the face of failure. It ended up costing me my marriage, my business, and a year of my life spent away from my children while I paid for my financial hubris in a federal prison camp.

Emerging from my own failures, I realized that I had, to a fair extent, repeated a pattern in my life that followed one established by my own parents: divorce, criminal behavior, cancer. I only hope I dodged the mental illness bullet. With more than a decade of perspective, what I hope to accomplish with this work is an unapologetic, reality-based examination of not only my own family but the way in which destructive familial patterns can repeat across generations.

When putting together this collection, it made sense to me to view it as a carnival, or a variety show, in which each flight of fancy—or vignette—is accompanied by a kernel of truth, like a ringmaster who introduces a contortionist, or a magician, or a carful of clowns. Because of the "holes in [my] family history" (Sikelianos), this work is necessarily autofiction, but I wanted to ground it firmly in reality so as to create a blend of truth and fiction that is imperceptible to readers, who would likely see it as memoir. I don't mind this perspective because the largest truths in the work are "capital-T true" (Foster Wallace), but my parents' perspectives are so unreliable that the details themselves could be either truth or fiction.

In this way, the work exists in a quantum entanglement-like state: until proven one way or the other, it exists simultaneously as both truth and fiction. I have included photos and medical records to support the foundational truth of this work. Interestingly (to me, anyway), Mom's medical records also underscore the potential unreliability of what the reader is reading. I think this interplay across the hard line of "reality" is exactly the type of work that autofiction was created to address. It also demonstrates the inability of even the most cautious of memoirists to accurately recount anything that is unequivocally true, because once they have been filtered through the lens of the writer, the experiences are no longer objective. They can only be

subjective. The only difference between memoir, autofiction, and fiction based on reality, then, is just where on the continuum of reliability the writer/narrator falls.

This, along with Mom's story, is why I think a carnival is an apt analogy for this work. Like this collection, a carnival is a frenetic experience comprised of multiple events, many based on illusion, occurring simultaneously. The carnivalgoer, as does a reader, perceives her or his own reality of the experience as it happens. Two people may attend a carnival and not see the same attractions but will both have experienced the same event. Because, for me, my parents' lives were a frenetic swirl of truth and fiction, reality and illusion, facts and lies, all experienced in my own reality, this story is best viewed as a carnival, and I'm simply the barker, here to drum up a crowd.

To achieve such freneticism, I have structured this work in a vaguely stream-of-consciousness style. Not that it is written in this manner, but rather, all of the segments comprising the whole are only loosely divided and flow back and forth into one another. It is framed in the present with the narrator sitting at a bar, waiting to reunite with his daughter, whom he hasn't seen in several months. The action occurs somewhat chronologically, with flashbacks and explanations nested here and there throughout the vignettes, between the bookends of the bar scene. The final scene was written with an eye toward including more vignettes addressing the narrator's adult life between the bookending bar scenes.

Farfetched as it may seem, there exists a body of poetics on whose shoulders this tumbler of a collection can stand. As previously noted, this collection is the culmination of a project I have undertaken to explore my past relationships with and current attitudes toward my dead parents and how such relationships and attitudes have informed decisions and mistakes I've made in my

own life, as well as other consequences of my connections to them and their lineages. The three main characters in this autofictional work are named for my parents and me: my mother, Candace, my father, Harold, and me, Trent. All other names, including those of Trent's brother, children, and ex-wife, are fictitious.

Like my own, Trent's mother suffered from teen-onset mental illness and familial abuse. She was locked up in a girl's "school" where she underwent electroconvulsive therapy (shock treatments) all before the age of sixteen. At that age, she fled her home in Iowa and joined a carnival. Around the same time, Trent's father, who was nineteen years older than my mother, had a wife and two young daughters in North Carolina. One day, without explanation, he just left. In 1966, working as a truck driver, Trent's thirty-seven-year-old father, Harold, drifted down to Jacksonville, Florida, where he met eighteen-year-old Candace, who was dancing as a stripper in a carnival that was wintering there. They married, and Trent was born two years later.

Based on the little I know, I have worked to create a collection of autofictional vignettes that bridge the unknown gaps and holes, linking the edges of their known lives to my own. For the most part, I have written in negative space and tried to fill it with an autofictional version of what should be there, as well as how it relates back to my life and to my relationships with my parents and my own children.

I started shaping the bones for this project in Professor Aguilar's Episodic Novel class and Professor Pimentel's Introduction to Poetry class during my second semester in the program. I toyed with some additional pieces in Professor Hernández's Coming of Age Novel class, and then let the project be for several months. I returned to it and realized that it was probably my thesis in fall of 2020 during Professor Ebeid's Writing from the Family Archive workshop. In fall of 2021, Professor Aguilar's Writing the Self and Professor Cucurella's Advanced Poetry

workshops helped to guide and inform me in terms of direction, methods, and manners of exploration going forward. Perhaps with subconscious intention, over this period, I had been using poetry to explore my own feelings about and relationships with my parents and their histories while using prose in an attempt to reconstruct specific moments.

In revisiting Lydia Davis's *Varieties of Disturbance* and Eleni Sikelianos's *The Book of Jon*, it became clear to me that I needed to better blend the two approaches into my collection, whether by infusing more reflection into prose, more detail into poetry, or permitting both types of works to stand side-by-side and inform one another. I had initially intended to intersperse poetry throughout this work but ultimately, after receiving feedback on drafts containing the poems, simply expanded some of the poetry pieces into full vignettes and discarded most of the remainder. One piece that started life as a poem survived. It is included in the collection as the extremely short, perspective-shifting prose poem surrounding a chess set and Trent's tenth birthday (82). Although it is different from the rest of the collection, I think its shifting perspectives stands well as a transitional piece, symbolically marking the unreliability in the work, the end of his parents' marriage, as well as a final memory before his father's move away from Iowa City.

Currently, the scope of the work spans several decades, weaving semi-chronologically between past and present. My decisions in terms of structure were informed by an increased acceptance of nonlinearity in literature and the modern bending of flash fiction and long-form poetry into longer, interconnected works. Davis' *Varieties* and Sikelianos' *Book of Jon* are perhaps the best examples of this that I can think of (although Jennifer Egan did manage to work a PowerPoint presentation into *A Visit from the Goon Squad*). However, because the collection encompasses a blend of autofiction and memoir filtered through the lens of poetry, I have leaned

heavily on the teachings of Plath, Levine, Karr, Dillard, Müller, and Gornick in terms of how I treat my characters and how to capture their essences in a manner that is both respectful and true—which is my ultimate goal with this work.

In *The Book of Jon,* Sikelianos writes, "It matters that there are holes in a family history that can never be filled, that there are secrets and mysteries, migrations and invasions and murky blood-lines. In this way we speak of human history." Jeannette Walls engaged in a similar exploration of the holes in her family's history with *Half Broke Horses: A True Life Novel,* which was a fictional exploration, due to lack of information, of her grandmother's life. Sikelianos continued her exploration of her family history's holes in her 2014 book, *You Animal Machine (The Golden Greek),* in which she sought to unveil the life of her own grandmother who was, like my mother was briefly, an exotic dancer. It is within this lineage of exploring the gaps in family history and reflecting on its relationship to my own past and present that I aspire to place this work.

I also believe that my collection falls within the intersecting lineage of works that address childhood or generational trauma, like Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club,* Eleni Sikelianos' books, and poems by Philip Levine, such as "You Can Have It." The reason I associate my works with those of these writers is not that I actually felt I was experiencing trauma as a child, but only after reflecting on my life and the events that shaped the lives of my parents, did I realize that my work clearly deals with trauma: domestic violence, infidelity, mental illness, gunplay, incest, incarceration, and hereditary disease. It was not until I looked at the stories and poems that morphed into this work as a collection that I attached the word "trauma" to pieces I'd disparately viewed as, simply, "my life."

Time is also an important element in this work, if not necessarily within each individual piece that comprises the whole. The events that I address in each segment of the work are an eddying whirlpool of cause-and-effect, circumstances-and-decisions that somewhat defy precise linearity. For example, my uncle had sex with my mother when she was a young teen; and my father molested my stepsister, with whom I did not have much of a relationship, after I was already in college. The former happened before I was born, the latter after I had left my father's house, never to move back. Yet, because of the former, I don't speak to my uncle, and because of the latter, my kids (who were an infant and a toddler when he died) were never left alone with their grandfather. Although never abused myself, the specter of sexual abuse, on different sides of the family and thirty years apart, played a significant role in my life.

Therefore, even though the events I wish to explore occurred in a linear manner, speaking chronologically, the timing of the effects such events bore on my life and writing are decidedly nonlinear. It is important to me that this collection reflect, to a certain extent, this nonlinearity because I think the way in which time is portrayed is crucial to the overall impact of a collection and that compiling the individual pieces in a linear fashion would dilute the power of and connectedness between the individual pieces—while creating a disingenuousness about the importance of the order in which the events occurred.

What I aspire to in this collection is to achieve a time effect similar to what Jennifer Egan achieved in *Goon Squad* or Lydia Davis in *Varieties of Disturbance*—propelling readers from one vignette to the next until the collection begins to take on the sense of what an individual's collected memories and experiences truly are: non-chronological scenes, snapshots, and partial remembrances of people, places and events that have faded in and out of importance, like some *gestalt* collection of ghosts. I would opine that crafting the collection in a manner resembling

memories, while maintaining a connective thread of characters and settings, and a loose chronological sinew, creates an almost-elemental connection between the pieces and its readers, allowing the work to resonate in at least some way (although, clearly, it will not be everyone's proverbial cup of tea). Moreover, the looseness of the structure, hopefully, adds a hermeneutic element: readers are not clued into the chronological cause-and-effect of events in the collection in a linear manner, so they read on, trying to answer the questions presented by the collection's form. Ostensibly, the desire to answer these questions pulls readers along the narrative thread until they are able to intuit what is happening in the overall collection. A modicum of temporal nonlinearity is crucial to the effect I want readers to experience with this work.

In *Poetics & Polemics*, Rothenberg, while discussing "the sacred" in poetics, touches on the importance of time in poetics. As he puts it, "It is in *time* that I engage myself, and it is to discover or create the sense of a life that can energize the common world we share.... Remaining here-and-now, the world begins to lure us with a feeling, an intuition... of the not-here/not-now." (5) (emphasis in original). Like *Goon Squad,* Davis' *Varieties of Disturbance* places a great emphasis on time by *not* following any sort of an obvious timeline or offering the reader breadcrumbs to follow with respect to where she is leading. And yet her individual pieces alert readers that Davis, herself, has a sense of time for the collection's pieces, both in their titles—"A Man from Her Past," "20 Sculptures in One Hour," "Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room," *e.g.*—and in their subject matter. The ravages of time on both health and memory are recurring themes in *Varieties of Disturbance*, as are Davis' ponderings on the sufficiency of time—and these are also key themes in my collection.

Time is fluid in *Varieties of Disturbance.* There is no strict chronology, nor does every piece necessarily connect with all others. Davis' thoughts on time in "20 Sculptures in One

Hour" could be likened to the structure of her own book: *Varieties of Disturbance* is like a museum and each piece within a statue. Like the statues, perhaps, not all stories will require an equal amount of time, and even if given what seems like a sufficient amount of time, it may end up seeming like too little. For example, saying that the single sentence comprising "Tropical Storm"[1] requires no more time than it takes to read the words shortchanges the reader on the experience offered by the piece. Rather, with each reading, "Tropical Storm" has the potential for taking on new and different permutations. As Rothenberg wrote, "Poetry, like religion, has been filled with such extraordinary manifestations… they aren't bound or fixed but open-ended, different… each time we go at them." (6). Like Davis's pieces, or poems from Plath or Levine, what I seek for my own collection is a manifestation that isn't "bound or fixed but open-ended, different… each time [readers] go at" the collection.

Even within individual pieces, nonlinearity can be important. For example, the vignette in which Harold meets Candace, which is, itself, a flashback from present day Trent at the bar, contains an additional flashback of Harold leaving his family. Although this is an important piece of information within the overall work, I don't feel, given the nature of the collection, that it requires much more examination in the context of the leaving itself. However, it does offer important background information for Harold's character in the context of meeting Candace. An additional time warp is also evident in the segment about the Sand Pits, which begins in the more recent past before receding to the more distant and then coming back, but not all the way to the present.

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1 "Like a tropical storm, / I, too, may one day become 'better organized.'" *Varieties of Disturbance,* iBooks edition.

Further, although I "prose-ified" the poems I initially included in this work, I believe that a clear line no longer exists between certain types of fiction and prose poetry, making both genres fair game in a collection such as this. The works of Sikelianos and Davis, once again, offer examples of these blurred lines. I prefer to treat poetry as an opportunity to explore an event using prose style but with a poetic structure and taking advantage of the relaxation of linguistic and syntactic formalities offered by poetry. Thus, in this collection, I take certain intentional liberties with use of spelling and compound words. Professor Chacón questioned this in his initial reading of the manuscript, so I added an explanation in the text, signaling to readers that such liberties were intentional:

> Sitting on the bench, I try and unfocus my eyes, let the world blur and blend together: into bluegreen treewater dotted with birdflashes and cloudsplotches, punctuated with crowcawing and jayyapping, and try to shake the day's junk out of my head. Sometimes, my head works that way in real life, too: Words just feel like they should fit together, like a frontdoor in a doorjamb. I'm probably just addled, crosseyed from reading too many police reports, tapping out motions and memos on a computer screen all a day long. When fresh air doesn't do the trick, I let the whiskey at Scoreboard blur the world for me (3).

I've often taken such liberties in my writing, even before I became familiar with Cormac McCarthy. Upon reading his works, though, *Suttree* and *Blood Meridian,* in particular, I felt both permission and empowerment to use what may be considered more poetic "license" in constructing a work of prose.

According to Rothenberg, modern poets carry at least two "shibboleths," citing the specific examples of "free verse and open form." (7). Reading works by Davis, like "Tropical Storm" or "Collaboration with Fly" or "Getting to Know Your Body," one would be hard-pressed to say that these are works of fiction and not free verse or open form poetry. Hence my own openness toward both forms, and my inclusion of the tenth-birthday, chess set vignette herein (82).

The works in *Varieties of Disturbance*—even the longer pieces—reflect the characteristics of Ezra Pound's imperatives for imagism: "direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective and objective" and "using absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation." (Rothenberg 10). These are the reasons that I frequently prefer applying a poetic filter to my prose. The poetic form, even when written in a prosaic manner, offers a more direct route to the soul of the piece. This has occasionally resulted in pieces that are too dense—"too much mud"—when I have failed to trim off the heavier crusts of prosaic language. Striking the right balance between the prose and poetry elements in my pieces is one area in which I must continue to be more intentional. One example of where I permitted the poetic to remain is in the vignette about John Wayne Gacy, where Candace is permitted to experience:

> The opening chords of "White Rabbit" drifted from the speakers, and Grace Slick's rhythmic intonations followed Candi as she floated up the stairs behind John, and into the doorframed shadows of the Kentucky Fried Chicken parking lot, where she slid onto the bench seat of a creamy-colored Olds Cutlass convertible, and leaned her head on John's shoulder, as he smoked and drove through the cool Iowa night, the firmament rotating above them, wind roaring in Candi's ears, muffling the sound of his voice and the distant music from the car radio. Weeks passed in the hour it took them to pull up in front of the small house in Tipton (42).

Other than insight into my own family and an attempt at exploring intergenerational patterns of destruction, I cannot yet say what I hope to accomplish by assembling this work. Rothenberg wrote that a "possibility of anthologies is to use the form as a kind of manifesto-assemblage: … to create works that… collectively present a challenge to the dominant system makers or to the world at large" (15). By using techniques like those seen in Sikelianos' and Davis' books—artifacts, word economy, structural looseness, and temporal fluidity that defies what a reader may be accustomed to seeing—I suppose this collection may be my attempt at a manifesto that presents a challenge to the dominant conception of what the autofiction of a middle-aged,

cisgender, straight white man in the early twenty-first century should be. Or perhaps it's a challenge to the world at large to judge me, or my life, or my work. But I don't really know. While Rothenberg seems to imply that some sort of intent is necessary to make a manifesto out of an anthology, he does not deny the potential for reading a manifesto into a pre-existing work. Perhaps, if manifesto this collection be, some reader down the road will be better able than I to see it as such.

I guess I am hoping that, as a work, this collection will compose "a grand assemblage: a kind of art form in its own right" (Rothenberg 15), and the way in which the collection is structured creates "a prime example... of the construction of movement through a book." (Rothenberg 15). With any luck, this exploration of the "holes in [my] family history" (Sikelianos) will create "a compendium of absences as well as presences" (Rothenberg 17) that invoke deeper thoughts and mental reactions than a simple, chronological narrative laid out for the reader.

Finally, although this thesis is a work of prose, I'd like to address the important role that working in poetic forms and addressing the subjects of this thesis in poetic forms played in the development of this work. When I write, far more often than not, I write prose, tending toward nonfiction and, frequently, as here, autofiction. What I try to convey through such writing is an idea or an event or a narrative, my reaction to it, and hopefully, a spark that affords the reader a connection to my work. For me, that is what has historically delineated prose from what I think of as poetry: my own purpose in putting pen to paper.

On the other hand, my experience in writing poetry, when I do so, is far different from that of writing prose. With poetry, whether it follows a defined structure or not, I am exploring

my own feelings and emotional reactions to a given event or situation, or, in some cases, the feeling, itself. For example, from the language of a prose narrative, the reader may be able to detect some of my opinions and feelings as a writer, but in writing it, I was not typically plumbing my own feelings. I was trying to paint a situation or experience or character with whom readers would connect. Were I to write a poem about the same topic, my own feelings and opinions would be more openly apparent—especially to me. Hence, the process of writing a story is informative, but the process of writing a poem also contains an element of catharsis. This is not to say that a poem cannot have a narrative or cannot relay an event, but for me, the filter through which it is processed is different from that through which I process prose.

The explorations of styles and inspirations I undertook during the process of completing this thesis permitted me to push the limits of my writing self and find new ways to both approach prose as a writer and apply poetry to a subject—a process I will continue to explore in order to grow as both a writer and a poet. Working on this collection, I vacillated between poetry and prose, even when trying to address the same topic. For example, a poem that I wrote in a course with Professor Pimentel, "Villanelle for Dad," about my father awakening my brother and me, putting us in a pickup, and chasing after my mother with a handgun, became more successful, I think, as the prose piece included here. In another class with Professor Pimentel, I used poetry to explore my feelings—and the indignities—surrounding a prostate cancer diagnosis,[2] which was the disease that killed my father. However, for purposes of addressing it here, it, too, worked better as a prose piece (12). On the other hand, I think the story about receiving a chess set on my tenth birthday (82), which I started in a course with Professor Hernández, but polished in a

[2] With early detection and surgery last summer, I should be okay.

poetry workshop with Professor Cucurella, was more effective with in its retained poetic structure.

Although I identify primarily as a writer of prose, poetry afforded me the opportunity to explore the subjects addressed herein and my feelings about them more deeply, kicking their tires, as it were, in a more personal and less formal manner than prose permits. For me, poetry comes from a deeper, more intuitive and emotional state than the prose that I write. If prose is a search for the *duende,* then poetry is its voice. I hope, because many of the pieces in this prose work derived from poems, that readers are able to hear some of the poetic voice and feel the *duende* from which this collection was born.

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SHOOTING SCARS: A TRUE STORY (MORE OR LESS)

by Trent Jonas

*"*I don't write for myself… I don't write for an audience…
I write for the thing that is trying to be born*."*
—N. Scott Momaday, paraphrasing William Gass

"All this happened, more or less."
—Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

There's a spot I like in Eden Prairie, where Purgatory Creek flows out of Staring Lake. It's a small clearing, canopied by oaks, about a mile from where I park and a few hundred feet off the paved path. If you sit on the bench there, you can look right up the creek, past a little white cedar, and out over the lake, see birds chirping and calling, soaring and fishing. I've seen muskrats, eagles, beavers, herons, owls, and coyotes in this spot. One morning, I walked into the middle of a warbler migration, a frenzied collection of orange and yellow and green and blue birds flitting from branch to branch—it was like being in a snow globe of Fruity Pebbles. Another time, I came across a used condom. I left it be, watching it harden and degrade over a summer, until one day it was gone. Maybe a squirrel used it to line its nest.

Mostly I go after work, and I usually have the spot to myself. I like to walk and breathe air that hasn't been recycled through seventeen floors of office building. I work at a firm that does criminal law,[3] so the trees, the water, and everything else about the place offer a natural antidote to the shit I have to read about all day long. Manslaughter, assault, murder, drunk driving, domestics, fraud, theft, child abuse, child porn, child molesting. A lot of child molesting, these days.

Sitting on the bench, I try and unfocus my eyes, let the world blur and blend together: into bluegreen treewater dotted with birdflashes and cloudsplotches, punctuated with crowcawing and jayyapping, and try to shake the day's junk out of my head. Sometimes, my head works that way in real life, too: Words just feel like they should fit together, like a frontdoor in a doorjamb. I'm probably just addled, crosseyed from reading too many police reports, tapping out motions and memos on a computer screen all a day long. When fresh air doesn't do the trick, I let the whiskey at Scoreboard blur the world for me.

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3 Where I'm a researcher and writer, not a lawyer or anything like that.

I don't remember exactly when I started coming to Scoreboard—a few years ago, I guess. They have a bourbon I like (Bulleit), it's a familiar neighborhood, and the price is right, if you know what I mean. It's close to the office; I stopped in a few times after I started working there—happy hour, or whatever. After a while, I got comfortable, started showing up a little more often, and now the bartenders reach for that beautiful, orange-labeled bottle before I sit down. I'm even starting to recognize the other folks who spend too much time at this bar.

At this age, the wrong side of fifty, it still takes me a while to warm up to a place. That's probably because I moved around so much as a kid. By the time I'd graduated from high school, I'd moved more than a dozen times and attended ten different schools. As soon as I could, I left Iowa and ran off to the University of Minnesota, more than a hundred happy miles away from my parents. Anyway, I think all that moving is what makes it hard for me to get comfortable in social situations or warm up to places. Take college, for instance. When I first landed on campus, other than introducing myself to my roommate, Randy, I bet I went a week without speaking to anybody. But I found Giocco, in Dinkytown, and I started going there to do homework or just sit and watch people coming and going, reading papers, playing chess. After getting my bearings, I'd spend hours at the coffeehouse, avoiding the dorm, reading, or drawing what I saw. Sometimes people would notice and ask what I was sketching or even compliment my doodles. They'd eventually move on, though, so I could relax again.

I finally warmed up to Scoreboard, too. Even though I'm not particularly social with anyone here but the bartenders, I've grown pretty fond of the place and even the regulars I see when I come in. Like that short-haired girl, Maggie. She's got tattoos up and down her arms, piercings in her nose—and in the holes of her ears. When I first saw them, I thought they were hearing aids. She says she's ex-military, and I suppose she looks it, but now she's a claims

adjuster. Maggie's always hanging on the corner of the bar, talking too much and too loudly—about just about anything to just about anyone. One time, she showed me a tattoo on the inside of her forearm. It was pretty good: a handful of 3D piano keys, with "Mary" in script across the front of them.

"Reminds me of my dad," she said. "I lost him to cancer." I mumbled something about being sorry and didn't ask why a "Mary" tattoo reminded her of her dad. Maggie's story seemed like it was probably a long one, I don't like long stories, and I don't like to talk about cancer. I've heard enough about it over the years. When I stop in at Scoreboard, and I'm just trying to drink and think and dull the edge of the day, I do my damnedest to avoid Maggie. Sometimes I just leave, and sometimes I stare real hard into my glass, watch that amber light dance off the ice in my whiskey, and hope she doesn't notice me.

Besides, I got my own issues with my own dad, and not just because of his prison stint, so I guess I don't want to hear about hers. It wasn't always like that though. When I was a kid, I pretty much worshipped Dad. I wanted to be like him, at least the way he seemed to my child's mind: strong, capable, funny. He told stories about growing up in North Carolina, about being outdoors, tromping through the Appalachian foothills, chasing snakes and other critters; and he'd regale us with his adventures in the Navy and Coast Guard. One of my favorite stories happened when he was a teenager, before he enlisted.

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On the fourth Thursday in November 1945, Americans were giving thanks for the safe return of fathers and sons and brothers from bomb-scarred European soil and bloodied Pacific beaches. While others surrounded themselves with family and food, friends and home, my father was on a tugboat: the *WSA-5*. Owned by the War Shipping Administration, but operated by Wood Towing Company out of Portsmouth, Virginia, the *WSA-5* worked the Intercoastal Waterway of the United States' eastern seaboard. On that windy Thanksgiving, the old tug was south of Chesapeake Bay, somewhere between Hampton Roads, Virginia, and Wilmington, North Carolina. Dad was one of three deckhands in a total crew of seven, a sixteen-year-old greenhorn among a group of grizzled men. Dally Thomas was the tug's ranking officer, middle-aged and sea-hardened, he had a sense of humor and a rampant lust for rutabagas, a pot of which the boat's cook always kept at the ready

Deckhand Harold Jonas had been aboard the *WSA-5* for seven months when the tug was directed from Portsmouth to Hampton Roads for a pick-up-and-tow job. A dredge and all its piping gear awaited towage to Wilmington: a nine-day run that would take them through the Thanksgiving holiday. No one aboard was excited at the prospect of such a trip, but the choice was not theirs.

Loosing the tug's ropes from the dock, Dad jumped on board and walked aft. He lit a cigarette, cupping his Zippo's flame against the wind, and watched the pier glide slowly off into the distance, fading into the tug's wake, as the captain nosed the *WSA-5* northward to Hampton Roads. Dad watched the other vessels dotting the Chesapeake and the ICW; he breathed in the warm, briny tingle of the bay spray for a bit, then flicked his butt overboard into the churning teal and white foam.

The tug retrieved the dredge and headed southward through the marshy inland waterway toward Wilmington. The small vessel made its way slowly out of the Chesapeake, pulling its monstrous, two-thousand-foot tow behind. The weather remained fair, for the most part, but when angry black billows kicked up steely water, the crew of the *WSA-5* would hole up. The dredge and two thousand feet of barges laden with piping were too much for the eighty-seven-foot tugboat's dual anchors to hold on their own. To hold the tow fast in foul weather, Dad and the other deckhands scampered over the tug's hull to the dredge and lowered its twin steel suction tubes deep into the silt and sand of the waterway, anchoring the tug and its entire tow against the weather.

After a few days underway, Thanksgiving broke as a crisp autumn morning. The sun playfully skipped shimmering rays across the ICW's green water. The *WSA-5* was little more than halfway to Wilmington, but the crew dropped the dredge's tubes deep into the channel bottom. The galley and mess were bright, filled with seven men swapping sea stories and telling lies; the cook intermittently left the room to come back with another dish of food, trailing heavy wisps of steam. He'd roasted five whole chickens for the crew's meal, a welcome novelty, as whole birds had been hard to come by in the war years. Despite their hard-working days, however, the men were not up to the task. Two whole chickens remained when the crew freed the dredge tubes from the bottom and set the tug and its tow afloat. Once underway, the cook approached the tug's youngest deckhand.

"Harold, I'll bet you five dollars you can't eat those two chickens I got left over," he winked to the other hands.

Dad quickly did the math. He was making seventy cents an hour. If he managed to win, he'd get another meal and almost a day's-worth of wages. He accepted and followed the cook

belowdecks. The cook sat Dad down at a table in the galley and put two plates before him, each cradling a roasted chicken. He handed Dad a fork, “Dig in.”

Dad started in with a leg, twisting a drumstick from the breast of the bird, the bones and cartilage popping, juicy, the aroma of the warm flesh wafting to his nose. Grease on his fingers, skin hanging loose from the bone and meat, Dad devoured the drumstick; then did so three more times. Using a fork and his fingers, he went after the breasts next, his face and hands slick with chicken fat and juice. He methodically removed meat until there was nothing left of the carcasses but scraps and bones. Jonas leaned back in his chair and farted. He grinned and waved for his money

Half an hour later, as families elsewhere were settling down for an evening of talk and radio, my father was heaving his Thanksgiving dinner over the *WSA-5*’s port rail into the glowing white churn below. But the five-dollar bill in his hip pocket went a long way toward soothing his discomfort.

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Dad's old stories kept me rapt and in his thrall throughout most of my childhood—along with spending time outdoors, fishing, hiking, camping, cutting wood. But not hunting. Dead animals sadden me, and I was terrified of loud noises, like gunshots, fireworks, and even thunder.

Especially thunder—like when, in the summer of '72, lightning struck the rod on top of our old house in Lowden, Iowa. The concussive roar that followed shuddered its frame, rattled dishes, and, through the hands I had pressed against the side of my head, overwhelmed my senses, the sound physically hurting me. I screamed; afraid, confused; in pain. Power gone, the room was black, and the windows pulsed with strobes of lightning.

Mom cradled David, my two-year-old brother, on our brown sofa. He was sleeping, blondish hair fanned out against Mom's turtleneck, while she rocked back and forth, chanting to herself—I heard "God," "beast," "revelations." I, too, wanted to be held, wanted to be asleep, pressed against her breast. But her words and her rocking made Mom as scary as the thunderstorm to me, unreachable, her fear contagious. Meanwhile, Dad sat in his chair smoking a Marlboro, its tip glowing orange and fading, the pulse of a distant beacon. Thunder rumbled like a freight train without end. Ozone unleashed by the lightning strike pricked at my nostrils, a if the devil, himself, had unleashed a cloud of brimstone into our house.

Dad stood. "Welp, I guess we better head down to the basement."

He turned on a flashlight and herded us out of the living room, across the cold linoleum of the kitchen floor, through a door, and down cracked concrete stairs. The cone of light revealed cobwebs and crumbling cement. A musty smell of damp wood permeated the basement's cool humidity. David had awakened and was crying. I tentatively uncovered my ears only to have them assaulted by another sound—a buzzing that was neither thunder nor David's wails. I asked Dad if he knew what the sound was.

"It's the fire alarm. The lightning probably set it off."

Before my parents bought the house as a fixer-upper, it had been an old-folks home, and it was wired with a commercial-grade fire alarm, a painted-caked sensor hung in the center of each room—and they were buzzing a chorus of terror that electrified my limbs: The house was burning down.

I covered my ears and bolted up the stairs, hollering, "Fire!" Thunder shook the house as I ran through the lightning-illumined kitchen and living room toward the front door. I struggled to turn the knob, worn smooth from all the hands that had turned it over the years, hands of parents and children, nurses and doctors, grandparents, and grandchildren. It was as if the ghost hands of all who had lived there before turned with mine to finally swing the heavy, oaken door inward. A spray of wind-driven rain misted my face, and as terrifying as the tempest was, I knew it was safer outside than inside the inferno that was surely swallowing our home, along with everything—and everyone—remaining within its walls.

Before I could step over the threshold, a force from over my shoulder pushed the door away from me, wrenching the knob from my hands, and slammed it shut. A ghost? I spun in shock to see my father, backlit, face dark, blue eyes ablaze, laughing. He lifted me up and carried me back through the house to the basement and to our inevitable demise in the oven that I was sure our cellar had become.

Of course, there was no fire; and Dad eventually figured out how to turn off the alarm, although he managed to punch a hole into the lath and plaster wall in his frustration. But the storm passed. As I was growing up, Dad loved to tell his friends about that storm and my reaction to the alarm. Yet, he never did it to embarrass me. Rather, he told the story proudly. I

always smiled and swelled a bit when Dad explained that I was the smart one in the family: “We all headed for the cellar; but when Trent heard the fire alarm, he ran for the door instead of the basement—just like I taught ‘im.” Clearly, my instinct for survival at the expense of my family had manifested early. I should have learned from the schism between Dad’s words and actions that night.

But, of course, I was too young. Even so, I probably should have kept running—just like my parents taught me.

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Not only did I not want to engage with Maggie about fathers, I didn't want to talk about cancer, either—it spooks me. Dad had two kinds, skin and prostate, and just this year, I found out that I've got 'em both, too. The skin cancer doesn't bother me so much. It's the same as anything else: keep an eye on it and cut it off when it shows up. The other scares the hell out of me, and not just because it's what ultimately got Dad. I mean the whole experience of finding out about it was like a kick in the nuts, almost literally, and that's what it felt like: a sickening hollowness in the gut, low, and deep inside.

But it didn't start there. You see, for the last few years, I've had this high-pitched buzzing in my ears. It's here now, even as I'm sitting and typing this. It started after I got out of Duluth, and after my divorce from Anne, but before I started drinking again. It's like the sound an old cathode-ray-tube TV makes when you turn it off but before it shuts down all the way; or when broadcast channels would go off the air at night, leaving a test pattern on the screen; or the tones they use for those auditory tests in elementary school, where you stare straight ahead or close your eyes to concentrate and raise one finger to indicate when you hear a tone. Except, with me, the tone never stops. Anyway, if I took one of those tests now, the ringing in my ears would drown out the tones and I'd flunk.

I thought maybe I'd seen too many arena concerts—live music is excruciating to me now, and I've hated loud noises ever since I was little—or spent more time than I should driving with the top off of my old Jeep, the wind roaring around my head and the sun baking my skin. Or, perhaps, I'd simply yelled too much at my children when they were younger, vein standing out from tomato-red forehead—Do this, don't do that, pick that up, don't touch it; no, you can't go to Prague while there's a war in Ukraine; you sent a fucking naked Snapchat to your fucking

camp counselor? (etc.)—my own voice bellowing in my head and against the walls, the strain and constant worry and fear of failure pressing outward against my skull for eighteen-plus years.

Or, I thought, it could be a brain tumor.

When I went in to have it checked out, the doctor diagnosed high blood pressure, mentioned that I was pre-diabetic, and said I should see a urologist about my elevated PSA; he put me on meds, told me not to be so fat. Eat less crap. Drink less booze. Lay off the caffeine. Exercise more. So I did: salads, water, decaf, walking. But after a few months I didn't look any thinner or feel any better, and even on days when my blood pressure locked in at a normal systolic and diastolic, the buzzing was there. It was a little quieter but still there. I eased back into bourbon and coffee; cookies; and TV on the sofa.

Then I saw a urologist who sent me for a catscan.

A week later, a nurse ushered me into a small exam room.

"Sit there." She looked exhausted as she gestured toward a vinyl-upholstered chair crammed between a padded, paper-covered table and a beige wall. "The doctor will be in shortly." She tried to smile, but after an excruciating second or two, gave up the effort in apparent frustration, and left.

From the chair, I had a clear view of a shelf holding an industrial-sized tube of KY Jelly and a box of non-latex exam gloves (XL), as well as a large, laminated, color poster of the male genitourinary system. I recognized the cross-section of a penis, mentally sized it up against my own, and was satisfied. The poster testicles didn't seem at all familiar; I was pretty sure my own balls didn't look like that. I couldn't relate anything else in the illustrated coils and tangles of red and blue and pink to my own body.

I heard a light tapping on the door, but before I could answer, it opened, and a beefy, middle-aged, Asian man in glasses and a too-tight, white lab coat walked in.

"Mr. Jonas?"

I nodded. He held out a prodigious hand, fingers girthy as bratwurst. My own large hand disappeared into his grasp.

"I'm Doctor Zhang." The name embroidered on the chest of his lab coat confirmed as much. "We have the results of your CT scan."

"Is it a brain tumor?" I asked eagerly.

"No… but you do have prostate cancer." I was deflated.

"Are you sure there isn't a brain tumor, as well?"

"There is no brain tumor, fortunately. But we do need to address your prostate…"

"Wait. Could prostate cancer cause the buzzing in my ears?"

"I'm afraid not. Please lower your pants to your ankles, spread your legs slightly, and bend over the exam table."

"You don't want them all the way off?"

"No." Zhang pulled a glove from the box on the shelf, strained to squeeze his hand into the non-latex, and slathered a copious amount of KY Jelly onto his index finger.

No brain tumor. I dropped my trousers, spread my legs as directed, and folded my body over the end of the exam table, perplexed: I'd been looking forward to a diagnosis explaining the years of noise in my head.

I sucked sharply through my teeth as Zhang's fat finger pried open my asshole and slid up my rectum, probing as it went.

The buzzing roared in my ears.

"Push back against my finger." I did and felt Zhang's digit hook upward inside me.

"Yes. Your prostate is definitely enlarged." He slid out his finger with a slurp, deftly discarded the glove, and handed me a wad of tissue. Jelly and god knows what else oozed from my ass.

"Stay in that position for a few minutes as you wipe yourself off," he said gently over my shoulder. In my periphery, I saw him pick up a folder and clipboard, sit down in a wheeled chair, and spin into the tiny desk attached to a corner in the room.

"At your age, I recommend surgery. Just get it out of there. Nip it in the bud," he said. I heard his pen scratching across paper as I stared into the beige wall, listening to the steady whine in my ears. A thought occurred to me.

"If you already knew it was prostate cancer from the catscan, why'd you have to do the finger thing?" I pressed the handful of tissue deep between my cheeks to catch a stray trickle of fluid.

"To confirm."

I nodded. "Any thoughts on what could be causing this thrumming in my head?"

"No, none." He slapped a sheet of paper down on the desk. "When you leave, take this to the lobby, and they'll schedule a consult with one of our surgeons."

"You won't do the surgery yourself?"

"No," he chuckled. "My hands are too big. I only do the exams."

He patted me on the shoulder. "Have a nice day."

Zhang left the room, sliding shut the door behind him. I sighed, still bent over the table, tissue pressed into my leaking asshole, head awash in stinging white noise. I closed my eyes, a cancer-ridden hypochondriac. I was becoming my father. Or my mother. Or both.

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A few nights a week at Scoreboard, I see that fat couple. They're almost too big for the barstools they sit on. He wears little, rectangle glasses that are too small for his face and sports a pancake-sized bald patch on the crown of his head, like an old-time monk. Makes you wonder why he doesn't just shave and go bald, doesn't it? She looks like someone from TV, but I can't place the name or the show. An older version, though. But they seem happy together. I catch them sharing little looks and smiles, and they always show up and leave together, taking bites off each other's plates, sipping from one another's drinks.

Good for them, I say. I'm glad they found each other. They seem happy. In a way, they remind me of my memories—such as they are—of Mom and Dad, when I was a little kid living in Tipton. I remember them laughing sometimes together and even kissing one another every now and then.

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Tipton was the first place I ever lived, but I wasn't born there. No, I was born over in Davenport, one of the Quad Cities on the Iowa side of the Mississippi, at the old Osteopathic Hospital. Doctor Chet Christianson—who would eventually take out my tonsils in the same hospital and treat me for a neck fracture I suffered at four or five when David pushed me off a playground slide—was the osteopath who delivered me.

Dr. Christianson's office was in Tipton, Iowa, where my parents lived in a white, single-story clapboard house across the street from the town water tower, crammed onto a half-lot next to the county jailhouse. This was the house I came home to after being born and where I lived until I was three years old. It was there that a fox kit Dad had agreed to watch for a friend nearly gnawed a tip of my finger off; and where Mom was trapped behind the kitchen door by Penny, the Doberman who prowled the fenced jail yard next door, when one day, the dog had managed her own jailbreak and David had led her into our house.

Dad was a building contractor with his own business. He built the bath house for Tipton's municipal swimming pool. He also built Stamos's Furniture store just down the block from our house. While he was working on the furniture store, he'd sometimes let me come along, since it was so close to home. On those days, I'd climb the big extension ladder to the roof, Dad following right behind, his arms on either side of me, guarding against a fall. I used to bring him tools when he called out for them: hammer, finishing nails, nail set, level, square, rasp, plumbline, trowel, eight-penny nails, handsaw, sixteen-penny nails, coping saw.

Figure 2. Dad and Trent.

“Trent knew the name of every damn tool in my toolbox before he was three,” Dad used to brag to whomever would listen. These days, I don’t even know what half the tools in my own toolbox are called, let alone what to do with them.

I’d wear my red and white Jacques Seeds cap—just like the one he wore—and my own toddler toolbelt with toddler-sized hammer, pliers, and screwdrivers. At noon, we’d sit atop the newly-framed furniture store, the piny smell of plywood and two-by-fours mingling with the acridity of fresh tar on the flat roof, and eat lunch. Dad would pour coffee into the cup lid of his big, beat-up steel thermos, and dole out Kipper Snacks and Vienna sausages on saltine crackers. I’d take sips of his coffee and drink from my own cold can of 7-Up or curvy, sweaty bottle of Coke. When I had to pee, he showed me how to aim carefully into the drain he’d built into the roof.

Figure 3. Mom and Trent.

Once, Mom let me walk down the block by myself to have lunch with Dad. When I got to the furniture store, I realized I had to pee and decided I’d better head up to the roof to do so. At the time, he was working up top and didn’t know I was coming—until Pat, the waitress at the café across the street, called out to him.

“Hey Harold, I think your boy needs some help,” she nodded toward the ladder, her blue eyeshadow sparkling in the sun.

When he popped his head over the edge and looked down the ladder, Dad saw me trying to climb up to the roof: pack on my back, toolbelt around my waist, pants and underwear around my ankles, pecker out—I was ready to pee but unable to step from one rung to the next.

Laughing, Dad worked his way down to where I was stuck, tucked me under one arm, and carried me up the ladder.

Most of my Tipton "memories" are really an amalgam of remembered anecdotes and stories that my parents told along with a dash of actual recollection. For example, I recall what the tip of my finger looked like after that fox bit it, blood seeping through the cracked fingernail, flesh like raw hamburger, but I can't picture the fox itself. Yet, I know the story.

Similarly, I can almost remember what Pat the waitress looked like and that, even at three, I thought she was pretty. It's only because of recounted stories that I "remember" sliding down from the red vinyl booth, and under the table, while she was taking Dad's order.

"Harold. Your boy," Pat tilted her pen toward the floor, where I was rubbing my hand up and down the smooth, soft hose covering her calf, whispering, "Nice. Nice. Nice."

I've heard the story dozens of times.

Thanks to Mom's retelling, I recall the time I packed my wagon full of toys and some clothes and angrily announced that I was running away. I made it almost all the way around the block, but I stopped at the café, where Pat put me up on a stool at the counter. I spun the thick padded seat a little left, a little right, drinking from a glass of cold chocolate milk and nibbling at a cake donut, feeling like a grownup. Meanwhile, Pat ratted me out, called Mom to come and get me.

We left Tipton in 1971, when I was just three, but I know the stories, and I've heard my parents tell them hundreds of times. Today, that little white house—which I can't really

picture—is a vacant lot, covered in brown grass, next to the "Old Cedar County Jail and Museum." These are a couple of pictures of what the town looks like now. The fence that protected Tipton from the vicious Doberman, Penny, still stands. The café is long gone, but the furniture store that George Stamos hired Dad to build is still there.

Figure 4. Former location of Tipton house.

These days, the name under its mansard roof is Keller's[4] Home Furnishings. Yet the building abides, as does the old water tower. Even if I don't remember the events directly, my version of Tipton belongs to me, and I know my own Tipton stories—those stories have become my memories, and it's pretty to think about my first hometown as existing in a hazy cloud of

Figure 5. Keller's furniture store, Tipton, Iowa.

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[4] Named after Max Keller, who managed the store for George Stamos at the time Dad built it, and with whom Dad became friends—they used to go hunting and fishing together. Once, I went with them, nearly two hundred miles away, to Forney's Lake, near the Nebraska border, so they could shoot snow geese: beautiful, white-plumed waterfowl, exploding in clouds of feathers. When George decided to retire, he sold the furniture store to Max.

This is Mom when she was a little girl growing up in Tipton. She's smiling in this picture, but from what she told me all her life, that smile belies a pretty fucked up childhood. I don't think Mom would have the Tipton of her childhood was a happy place. She grew up there, often left alone with her brothers, Tim and Teddie, or in the care of her grandmother. She was a thirteen when "Control"—a voice she'd hear in her head for the rest of her life—first spoke to her, and she began to become the Mom I knew. When she was older, she used to keep the index and middle fingers of her left hand crossed, it seemed like all the time, "to ward off the devil," she'd say, and when I look at this picture, I see her holding her hand in almost the same way, but her fingers aren't quite crossed. Maybe the devil hadn't yet found her.

Figure 6. Mom as a young girl.

When I see this picture of Mom, I can't help but think about this little girl and all she would have to cope with. Tim. The voices. Mitchellville. She got through, but not unscathed. Nobody would be. She was just a child, only twelve, when it happened the first time.

∞

Do it.

Candace opened her eyes. The room was dark, and the clouds, visible between the curtains, reflected the white glow of streetlights over on Main. A February chill ached through the window's single pane. She could feel it on her cheek like the sting of a recent slap.

You know what to do. It was a deep, breathy whisper, a man's voice, but as always, she knew no one else was in the room. The whisper had first come to Candace the previous summer, around the time school let out, just after she'd let Tim fuck her.

"Let me put it in you, and I'll give you a dollar," he said. "Show me the dollar," Candace said. He did, and she took it, felt the soft paper in her hands, crumpled the bill and slipped it into her pocket. They went up to Tim's room, where Candace slid off her green, knee-length shorts, her panties, and lay back on his bed. She looked up at the cracking plaster on the ceiling and let him lie on top of her, felt him probing between her legs until he found where he wanted to be. As he thrust again and again against her, Candace stared into the plaster, straining to see into the jagged black lines of the cracks, looking for a place to escape, like a stream on a desert plateau, slipping into the network of tiny canyons in the ceiling. Candace bit her lower lip until the skin broke, until it hurt more than what Tim was doing down there. He moved around for less than a minute, moaned, shuddered, and stopped; she felt his prick slip out of her, dragging a string of hot snot behind it.

His face moved into her vision, eclipsed the ceiling. He looked so earnest, hopeful. "Did you like it, Candi?" he asked. "Sure," she said, pulling on her panties, a dull sting between her legs. She picked up her shorts and went to the bathroom, wiped blood and cum off her thigh.

It wasn't until the next day that Candace got to walk the three blocks to Schultz's dime store and pick out a small box of her favorite black-licorice candy, breaking the dollar for that five-

cent box, enjoying the smooth, solid weight of coins in her left hand as she held the rattling box of licorice in her right and walked across the street to the courthouse lawn. Candace popped an almost-minty nib into her mouth, exhaled anise through her nose, lay back and, eyes closed, let sun spill across her face. Instead of a daydreamy other-place, a red-rock canyon opening to a green oasis of cottonwood and willow, or a soft bed in a room at the Five Seasons in Cedar Rapids, all her own, with trays of little cakes and a fancy bathtub, Candace saw Tim's face: casting a shadow across her own, eclipsing her. And she heard it.

If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee.

Candace sat up, looked around, but she the only one on the lawn that afternoon. Touching the skin next to her eye, she scratched, at first delicately, as if there were an itch. She dug in, gouging deep and hard until the skin pulled up under her nails and blood tinged her fingertips. She put them in her mouth, sucked the metallic tang, and realized, when her vision had not changed, that she had failed. Candace's eye remained in its socket.

In coming months, she heard the voice—no, not "heard," rather, felt, sensed in her head, a whisper—more and more often, usually when her eyes were closed. Candace gave it a name. Or it named itself: "Control." Eventually, Control disregarded the state of her eyes and came whenever it pleased, whether she was lying in bed, trying to sleep, looking up at clouds through her window, or watching other kids play in the park down the street.

Candace didn't play so much herself. It's not that she didn't want to, she just wasn't sure how. She remembered playing, with her cousins and with Grandpa Arthur, but he died when Candace was four years old. By then, her mother, Hazel, had left for her third husband, gone to Muscatine, and now her father, Forest, spent the days at his radiator shop, sitting next to the coal-

burning stove, pinching wads of tobacco out of his Red Man pouch, tucking them into his cheek and dripping brown spit into an old, sixteen-ounce Campbell's soup can. He'd listen to whatever game he could find on the AM dial of a stained, transistor radio until he could lock up the shop and walk over to Sportsman's Lounge for his nightly poker game in the back room.

Candace, Tim, and Teddie were left alone, or with Bertha, their grandmother. After Arthur died, and was no longer there to run interference, Bertha was free to do as she pleased. She ruled the house with all the kindness of a fairytale stepmother, made Candace wash and clean and cook for her brothers and for her; trim her toenails and help her with baths; wash and brush her hair. But no matter what Candace did, she could never please her grandmother. In return, Bertha would bend her granddaughter over her nightstand, and with the white, loose skin of her upper arms rippling in anger, beat Candace's bare thighs with the backside of a hairbrush, smacking the resin against her skin until Mom's flesh was red and purple and tender, and she could neither sit nor lie back without discomfort. Through every grade of school, kinder through seventh, this had been Candace's life. Playing was a distant memory—an illusion to her now—like "vacation" or eating at a restaurant: a thing other people did. But she wasn't even sure that she missed playing or wanted to be out there with other kids. It was just something that Candace knew she didn't do.

Something else Candace knew she wouldn't do again is let Tim fuck her. He pestered, sometimes pleaded, and once even offered her two dollars. Candace managed to put him off. But unlike Tim, when Control persisted, she didn't know what the voice was asking. Until that night.

Do it. You know what to do.

That night was different. In the morning, Candace had boiled a potato and an egg. Carrying the egg in her right hand and the potato in her left, she walked the twelve frigid blocks to Tipton

Middle School. The air numbed her face, nostrils sticking together on each inhalation, her breath a heavy cloud when she exhaled. But with the egg and the potato, her hands stayed warm until she pulled back the brick building's heavy door. After hanging her coat, Candace peeled and ate the egg for breakfast, saved the potato for lunchtime.

She sat at her desk, gazed numbly at the winterscape out the window, listened to teachers: factors and quotients and participles and Woodrow Wilson and recipes and the Commies and what they were going to do to the U, S of A now that Kennedy was president. When the bell rang, she put on her coat and went home, not wanting to but knowing that the hairbrush would be her reward for lingering too long. Home, shaking off the cold and her coat, Candace helped Bertha with her bath, her hair, and made sauerkraut and eggs for Tim and Teddie, who wolfed it down so fast that she was left with hardly anything to eat, herself. The frost on the kitchen windows offered evidence of the furnace's losing battle against the February chill.

Then she went to bed, rolled into her quilt and blanket, and slept.

Do it.

This time, when the whisper awakened Candace, it was different. She felt an urge growing, building, coming into focus with an emerging clarity that had not been there before.

You know what to do.

This time, she did.

Candace shoved off her bedding, got up and walked out of her room, down the short, dark hallway and through the kitchen to the bedroom where her father should have been sleeping. She went to his closet and found his .22 caliber Marlin rifle. It was heavier than it looked, the burled-wood stock smooth with wear, comfortable in her hands. She knew to open the bolt-action chamber to check for a bullet in the breach, like Grandpa Art had taught her when she'd gone squirrel

hunting with him along the Cedar River bottoms. The bullet was there. Taking off her pajama top, Candace lay back on her father's bed and pressed the muzzle of the barrel against the skin just beneath her belly button and held it tight, both hands pulled up hard against the sight.

She put her big toe inside the guard and pressed back on the trigger.

A burst of burning pain vacuumed breath in through her mouth and down to her core, then nothing but a warm puddling on the bed, under her back—blood oozing out of her body like the jizz Tim had spat into her. Candace closed her eyes, and for the first time in months, she didn't see Tim's face. She could feel the rifle barrel's cold metal against her thigh, its stock smooth along her calf. She was warm and cold at the same time. Comfortable.

And Control wasn't there.

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After Mom shot herself, they didn't circle the wagons, get her help, or attempt to understand why she'd tried to end her life. Mom pleaded with them, begged to stay at home, promised to be good, and that she wouldn't do it again. They didn't listen. For Mom's first psychiatric commitment, they didn't send her to the university, or another hospital, a place of healing. Rather, they had her locked up at Mitchellville at the old Iowa Industrial School for Girls,[5] a compound of cottages and gothic old buildings, where they sent teenage girls who had stolen, assaulted, beaten, murdered—or who simply had no other place to go. "Delinquents." (Doesn't that arched gate look like those you'd see in pictures of German concentration camps? "*Arbeit macht frei*!") There were also orphans and runaways, but Mom was one of only a handful of psych commits. It was in Mitchellville where they first strapped her to a table and put a rubber paddle in her mouth—God, she must have been scared: kicking, fighting, eyes rolling. Did they sedate her? I don't know how it worked in the early sixties, what they did before sticking lubed electrodes onto her temples and shooting a hundred volts through her brain, to ricochet around her skull, week after week, until they believed Mom was "cured."

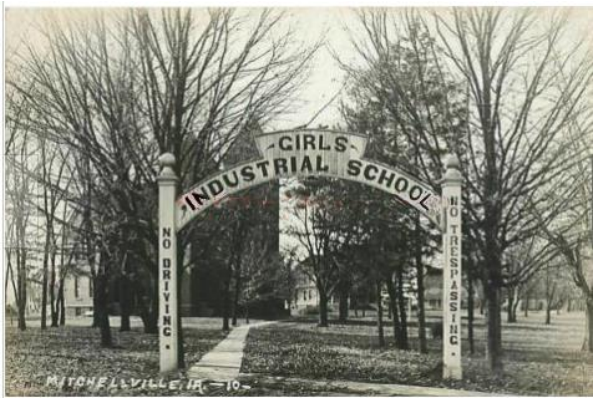

Figure 8. Entrance to "Mitchellville," Mitchellville, Iowa.

Figure 7. Administration building, Mitchellville, Iowa.

[5] The Iowa Correctional Institution for Women, a modern prison, now occupies the site.

At the time she was there, Mitchellville's—what? Inmates? Guests? Residents?—were housed in "cottages." Mom never told me about a friend or roommate or any other girls she met while she was there, never said anything about sharing a room or cell. Whenever she talked about Mitchellville—that's what she always called it: "Mitchellville," the identity of the town itself sucked up, as into the whirling vortex of a spring tornado, and subsumed into all that happened to her at that nightmarish reformatory—Mom described being alone in a room with no furniture, sometimes the walls were padded, sometimes they were concrete. But it was always dark, and there were always spiders, and Mom always screamed to be let out, yet I don't know if she ever was—a part of her mind was trapped in the place for the rest of her life.

Figure 9. Mitchellville "cottage," Mitchellville, Iowa.

I don't know how long Mom actually stayed in Mitchellville—maybe a year, maybe two—but I know that what happened there made her run. Did she run away from the reformatory, itself, or run away from home after her release? Is it really running away from home when you don't have a "home," a place where you feel safe and loved and cared for, to go to? Maybe Mom found home for a while with the carnival she joined, among the roustabouts, geeks, touts, dogs, and horses, until she met Dad and made her own home. Or maybe she never found a home. As long as I knew her, she was always seeking, sometimes running, wishing to be somewhere somebody something else, outside of her skin, outside of her life, outside of this

world. Control set her on that course, and Mitchellville was not a palliative. Rather, it was an incendiary: fuel that rocketed Mom inexorably down her life's pitted road.

Mitchellville cast a long shadow over the rest of her life. And if they hadn't sent Mom to Mitchellville, I probably wouldn't be here today.

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After running away from Iowa at sixteen, whether from Mitchellville or Tipton, Mom traveled with a carnival as an "exotic dancer"—a stripper. In trying to piece together the fragments of this part of Mom's life, about which I know almost nothing, I've become fascinated with images of carnivals from the 1960s. The show spent the winter months down in Jacksonville, Florida, where Mom was working when she met my father, who was passing through, driving a truck between the Sunshine State and his native North Carolina.

What this means for me is that every vintage carnival image from the sixties is like a Schrödinger thought experiment: Mom simultaneously exists and does not exist in each picture. Unlike Erwin's famous cat, though, Mom defies quantum analogy.

Mom's presence or absence in the image never becomes fixed—the uncertainty persists: practically any young, white, dark-haired dancer in those photos could be my mother, the image quality just unclear enough that I can never be sure of the facial features; and, to be honest, even if the features were clearly discernible, I'm not certain that I'd recognize my mother's face from that time of her life. The Mom that I knew barely resembled the few childhood and preteen images of her that still exist. But, after the tumult of her teen years, and before I knew her as my mother, I'm not sure I could pick her out of a photo—unless I could see her eyes clearly.

Her eyes are my daughter's eyes, and even though Mom has been dead for more than twenty years, I've known my daughter's eyes for almost as long. Other than her eyes, there is another thing that I know would help me to pick out Mom from those old carnival pictures. When she was dancing in the tent, she went by "Candi Kisses," so I scan marquees and placards in old photos for any mention of Candi (or even "Candy") Kisses. I've never seen one, but it's another clue to search for. Despite my lack of success in terms of actually finding my mother in

any of the old images I've pored over, the process of doing so has sparked in me a fascination with the images, themselves—and helped me to find Mom in other ways.

It's incredible how many such images are out there in the world, and I wonder how many other "lost" mothers are there among them. Although I haven't found Mom in these images, I've discovered her milieu, and in terms of thinking about those two-or-so years in my mother's life, this is a comfort. I have an idea of the types of places she worked, the people who may have ogled her (*e.g.*, Dad) and even a notion of what the people she worked with may have looked like. What I am left guessing at is how she felt, what she wore, the situations in which she found herself, and, importantly, why she did it. And, of course, the images—it's the images that allow me to imagine what it was like when Dad first laid eyes on her, on that Jacksonville carnival midway in 1966.

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When Harold sees her, he can't take his pale-blue eyes off the scar—almond-shaped, an angry pink color, raised and shiny in the center, around the edge; duller and smoother in between, like an eye staring back. She's dancing on the rough-boarded stage, her feet clad in thick-heeled, white-and-brown saddle shoes (no socks). As her tummy rolls and twitches, the scar—just above the gold-sequined waistline of her green-fringed panties—winks wickedly at him. *Gorgeous,* he thinks. *But she's a horrible dancer.*

Yet, she is clearly in the thrall of the music: smiling and looking down toward the stageboards (eyes closed), holding onto — and leaning away from — the tarnished brass pole, her tasseled, pale-white titties swaying out of time to the bawdy *buh-bum* of the drums and the raunchy, plungered trombones that fill the dim and dusty tent to its pitch-black peak. A loose strand of naked light bulbs hangs in a lazy curve behind the stage. One flickers on and off with an audible buzz.

The men sit on wooden folding chairs—arranged on straw and sand in an arc around the platform—or stand at the edge of the stage, sweating in the close, canvas enclosure, whooping and hooting and pleading with her to look up or take something off or to do anything but that languid simian swaying.

Harold leans against a tentpost, off to the side, hypnotized by her arrhythmic gyrations, his eyes following her limbs like they're watching a pendulum but always returning to her scar. When she sweeps her left arm past where he stands, Harold feels the air move across his face (a mix of body odor and drug-store perfume catches his nose), sees the scar stretch into a squint and relax again. The stink of sweat and hay and smoke and the inhuman man-sounds evoke a stockyard—beasts with rolling eyes, twitching with nervous energy, bellowing, and pawing at the air, the floor, each other, certain of an inevitability, unsure what it will be. The last thing they expect is their own disappointment.

Harold watches: She just smiles and swings in a slow semicircle, ignoring the tent's rutting livestock, the soles of her shoes pivoting deliberately on the boards; she seems to see nothing but the backs of her eyelids; hear nothing but the the drums, the horns. And then the music stops.

Her hand drops from the pole, and the smile drops from (Harold notices) her sweetly-curved, heavily-painted lips. She opens her eyes, blinks once. Sweat-slackened black hair lies flat along her cheekbones, hanging limply to her shoulders. She looks out into the haze, over the heads of the jeering and jostling men, then turns abruptly and walks quickly off the stage (shoes clapping on the boards) and out the back of the tent.

An unshaven man in suspendered pants and a pitted-out white shirt, a loosened bowtie, and a bowler, gnawing on the stub of a ten-cent cigar, steps onto the stage, bellowing, "How about a round of applause for the sexy and sweet Candi Kisses?" The audience grumbles, and even when Harold slaps his palms together, the only applause that echoes is that of the emcee.

"All right, gentlemen—and I use the term loosely—this show is over! The next one starts in half an hour, if you want to see less—and when I say less, I mean more: more skin! See you in thirty minutes!"

The flaps peel back at the front of the tent; burly men in grimy t-shirts herd the audience toward the midway lights. "Let's go! Show's over! Ev-ery-body out!"

Harold blinks his eyes against the flashing neon. Although it's still humid, there is a breeze in the February air, and even among the throngs of carnivalgoers, he feels less caged than he had in the thick air of the girlie show tent. Looking back at the façade that simply reads, "Dames!" Harold watches the barker climb onto a box and prepare to pull in an audience for the next show (at three bucks a pop). A bored, redheaded woman draped in a sequined, black dress, one strap dangling off the shoulder, almost to her elbow, sits on a tall stool next to him, smoking, and staring

out, beyond the surging heads of the crowd, toward the stand of palms that mark the edge of the carnival grounds.

What now? Harold thinks. *Back to the truck? Don't have a home to go to—that's for damn sure.*

After checking the load and making sure the truck-length, pine logs are chained securely to the trailer, Harold climbs into the cab of his big rig, shifts into gear, and starts slowly down the logging road that had been hacked into the shoulder of the mountain, just west of Asheville. This was his first over-the-road run, but even hurtling down this narrow, rutted track in an old semi was better than the suffocating life of a plumber's apprentice—union scale, a little brick house, church on Sundays, Janelle, Patty and Jane all wanting a piece of him the second he walked through the door—he had felt trapped and was exhausted all the time.

Looking over his shoulder, back into the sleeper, Harold sees everything he now owns, and through the open window, he can smell the pines that line the mountainside. An occasional sting of August sun catches his elbow whenever he rounds a curve away from the treeshade. This is more like it. Just after the War, he'd been in the Coast Guard, Navy, and Merchant Marines. He'd crossed the Pacific and seen places a lot of folks he met had never heard of—Saipan, Shanghai, Tsingtao. Like a ship, Harold needed to be on the move; nine-to-five family life had taught him that.

A friend who owned a trucking business told Harold that he needed someone to drive a route to Florida, and two weeks later, he walked away. No note, no phone call, nothing—he didn't even tell his daddy that he was gone for good. Other than some clothes and tools, an old canvas

tent, and a thermos of coffee, Harold had left everything behind—including a white-and-pink, stuffed teddy bear holding a card that read, *Happy 12th Birthday, Patty. – Your Dad.*

And here he is, at a carnival in Jacksonville. Harold shoves his hands into his pockets and walks around the side of the tent. There is an opening at the back—he figures the girls use it to get up to the stage. Three small, silvery trailers are arranged in an arc behind the tent. A couple of picnic tables sit under the awning that stretches between the trailers…

And there she is.

Candi is leaning, knee bent, her back and one foot pressed against a trailer, smoking under the awning. She's still wearing the green, tasseled panties, but now, she also has on a white-and-blue-checked men's dress shirt. It's unbuttoned in the front, and her skin is lighter than the fabric. Harold's eyes land first on the shadows and curves of her cleavage, then climb to her freckled collarbone, her pale throat. Her face.

She's looking down, toward the ground or something else altogether (her toenails?), murmuring to herself, whispering something he cannot hear, as she coaxes rhythmic pulls from a cigarette, chewing her thumbnail between inhalations.

Harold strolls over and steps up to her.

"You're Candi Kisses." He puts out his hand. "I'm Harold."

She looks first at his hand and then toward his ear, startled. Furrowing her brow, she studies the side of his face, catches his eyes with hers.

"Your shoe's loose," she says.

Harold slowly curls his fingers and pulls his arm back to his side.

Candi stabs her cigarette into the corner of her mouth and squats down, picks up his laces, and deftly ties his brogan. *A little tight,* he thinks. Looking down, he sees that she's still perspiring, hair wet with sweat, glinting like crowfeathers in the sun. She stands, taking the cigarette from her mouth, locks his eyes with hers, and exhales a jet of blue smoke into his face. Harold breathes in, savors the smell, and pulls it down into his lungs (not the Marlboros that he prefers). Candi's eyes are gray, flat and impenetrable. They offer no hint at what she's thinking—or even what she sees. She smokes and she stares.

Keeping her gaze, Harold gently reaches his hand under the cool fabric of her shirt, just above her sequined waistline, and gently traces the smooth roughness of her scar with his fingertip. He feels her skin shiver, sees her eye twitch.

"What happened here?" he whispers.

Without blinking or moving her eyes from his, she drops the cigarette onto the sandy ground and steps on it. Breaking her gaze, she turns—bumping Harold with her shoulder—and walks away, blowing twin plumes of smoke from her nostrils.

Touching his arm where her shoulder had struck him, Harold watches Candi step up into the trailer, letting the aluminum door's loaded springs slam it shut behind her. Her earthy body odor, sweetly-stinging perfume, and cigarette smoke fill the space she's just vacated. Harold leans in and, closing his eyes, inhales deeply through his nose.

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Candi gave into Harold's wooing. They left Florida together and moved back to Tipton. That would've been '66 or so: Candi was eighteen; Harold was thirty-seven. Sometime during the next couple years they got married—no, not in a church or anything like that—at the courthouse in Cedar County, Iowa, according to Mom. Unless they didn't. I've never seen a marriage certificate, and Mom occasionally claimed that she and Dad were common-law wife and husband. Either way, they lived together, and a couple years later had me, and then David.

Before that, though, they were a young couple in the late sixties and some of what they'd picked up in Jacksonville came with them to small town Iowa. Candi liked wearing minidresses and her tall, white go-go boots that zipped up to her knees. She bought Harold silk shirts with prints of eagles soaring across a blue sky, or palomino stallions galloping across golden plains, which he wore unbuttoned to his midriff. On weekends, they'd head out to larger towns, spending the nights at clubs in Davenport, Cedar Rapids, or Iowa City. They met people and made friends with other couples and went to parties. They all fucked each others' wives and boyfriends, and girlfriends and husbands.

It was through this scene that Harold and Candi met Randy and Alicia Waxmore, who quickly became their closest friends, and they spent most weekends together, often in Iowa City where the Waxmores lived in a small split-level house, with fresh tan paint and a green yard dotted with tiny trees, their bases wrapped in plastic tubing to ward off deer and rabbits, on the north side of town, near the Iowa River. The lower level was paneled in dark wood, and floored with shag carpet the color of cantaloupe flesh. A wet bar, projector TV, deep leather sofa, and large, round waterbed filled the space.

The Waxmores typically greeted Harold and Candi at the door wearing no clothes and encouraged them to undress upon arrival. They would spend the night, or sometimes, the entire

weekend, naked, eating, drinking, rubbing, fucking, and sleeping. Sometimes, the Waxmores would drive over to Tipton, but the Jonas household was too small and spare for the couples' taste—the Iowa City home was much better appointed. Occasionally, the foursome would go out together.

Once, they visited the Red Stallion in Coralville, just off I-80, behind the Hawk-I Truck Plaza. They squeezed around a small table in the dark, bumping each other and the table, sloshing drinks onto cocktail napkins, watching a blonde woman on stage languidly peel off her scant clothing, twirl and toss it aside, to the twang of the country music that filled the room. Several more dancers and and several more drinks came and went. Randy set down his glass, hard, the smack drawing the table's attention.

"Harold," he said. "I'll bet you five dollars you won't fuck Alicia right here." Harold looked at Alicia, who smiled. Candi stared at the dancer on the stage, watching her spin around the pole, her red locks whipping round and round, like the blades of underpowered ceiling fan. Standing, Harold walked to Alicia, who stood to meet him. Randy quickly gathered all the glasses and put them on the next table over. Alicia looked up and kissed Harold, throwing her arms over his shoulders and rocking her ass back onto the table, between Randy and Candi. He reached up into her skirt, and finding that she wasn't wearing panties, unzipped his jeans and leaned into her. She pulled him closer and ground against Harold; he thrusted into her. Randy leaned back in his chair and smiled, sipping from his rum and Coke, as the table rocked before him, his wife atop it with the cock of another man inside her.

Dad bragged about that night to David and me when we were teenagers and with him on a trip to North Carolina. We had grown up knowing Randy and Alicia as family friends. They would visit a couple times a year and bring their kids, Dax and Travis, who were a little younger

than me. David and I always liked it when they visited, and until Dad told us about that night, we had no idea what had been going on with the adults. Mom never mentioned a time when Dad fucked Alicia at a strip club, but after Dad told us, I always wondered how Mom felt about the whole swinging thing. Later in life, when the topic of our parents and the Waxmores would come up, David and I, somewhat unkindly, thought Randy got the short end of the swinging stick. We just couldn't imagine that Mom was as willing a participant in the whole thing as Dad and Alicia were, or that Randy would be very attracted to Mom.

Harold saw something in Alicia that he apparently didn't see in Candi, and began to pursue her outside of their foursome. He'd visit the Waxmores without Candi, and sometimes, he and Alicia would go out alone. One weekend in 1967, the foursome went to a party in the basement of a Kentucky Fried Chicken in Waterloo. The host was the owner of the franchise, and the lower level of the restaurant was set up as a sort of lounge, with a wet bar, a pool table, several sofas, beanbag chairs and beds, all illumined with black and colored lights, and a top-of-the-line hi-fi system with shelves and shelves of LPs taking up an entire bar. Randy had met the host through a mutual friend. When he ushered Harold, Candi, and Alicia through the windowless white door on the side of a KFC, they were initially confused, but they heard music thumping and, as they made their way down the stairs, could hear glass clinking and voices murmuring.

"Randy!" A voice called out when they reached the bottom of the stairs. A stocky, smiling man in his late twenties, hair swooped to one side, walked over and embraced Waxmore, a bit of his drink spilling onto the back of Randy's suede jacket. "Who have we here?" He asked, eyeing Harold.

"John, this is Harold. His wife, Candi, and, of course, my wife, Alicia."

Randy embraced Harold, sloshing more of his Scotch onto the latter's chambray shirt, and offered a downturned hand Candi and Alicia.

"John Gacy," he said with a smile. Harold pulled Alicia into the room and over to a corner, where they found a sofa and disappeared into the dark. Randy wandered over toward the bar, leaving Candi with John, who eyed her up and down. "Please come in and mingle. Fix yourself a drink."

Candi smiled, "Thanks." Noticing his hand as he led her into the room, she asked, "Are you married."

"Yes," John frowned. "But Marlynn doesn't care for my parties, so she's at home or over to her parents or," he swept his drink through the air, "somewhere." He gave Candi a gentle shove toward the bar, and went over to where two young—closer to Candi's age, anyway—men were standing and chatting. Looking around, Candi noticed that most of the guests were men, and most of them appeared much younger than the host. Shrugging, she poured a glass of white wine, lit a cigarette, and found a spot on a sofa. She watched the people moving through the dim lights in the room, felt the drums and bass of the Motown from the speakers, and smoked. John occasionally topped off her wine.

Candi lost track of Harold and Alicia, but she watched Randy stalk silently up the stairs the stairs toward the exit, John following behind. A few minutes later, John came back down alone. Someone handed a joint over her shoulder, and she took a pull and handed it back. She leaned back against the sofa, closed her eyes, and exhaled, sending the smoke straight up in a puff that looked like the steam from the stack of locomotive. The next thing she knew, someone was shaking her shoulder.

"Hey. Hey. I don't remember your name, but you have to wake up."

Candi opened her eyes. It was John. The room was a little brighter, the music was quieter. She saw two men, one wearing a white, polyester shirt with Colonel Sanders' smiling face embroidered on the breast, slumped over each other on another sofa.

"Candi. My name's Candi."

"It's time to go home," John said.

"Where's Harold?"

"He left."

"Randy?"

"Gone, too," he smiled. "I'll take you home." The opening chords of "White Rabbit" drifted from the speakers, and Grace Slick's rhythmic intonations followed Candi as she floated up the stairs behind John, and into the doorframed shadows of the Kentucky Fried Chicken parking lot, where she slid onto the bench seat of a creamy-colored Olds Cutlass convertible, and leaned her head on John's shoulder, as he smoked and drove through the cool Iowa night, the firmament rotating above them, wind roaring in Candi's ears, muffling the sound of his voice and the distant music from the car radio. Weeks passed in the hour it took them to pull up in front of the small house in Tipton.

"You live next to a jail," he said. She nodded.

"Come inside."

They squeezed through the tiny front door, and, alone in the unlit house, Candi pushed him back onto the rough, green fabric of the sofa, hard white streetlight casting a rectangle through the window onto the wood paneling. Fumbling at first, Candi unzipped his pants and pulled out his limp, white cock.

"No," he said. "I like…"

“I know,” Candi said, stroking him, faster and faster, pounding her fist harder and harder against his pelvis, feeling the blood pulsing as his cock hardened in her hand. “I know.” And she moved her mouth down over the swollen head and began to suck. John gasped, grabbing at the cushions on either side of him, and craned his neck back over the sofa, until it hit the paneled wall, a low moaning emitting from within his abdomen, vibrating against Candi’s forehead.

Thirty-three years later, she told a psychiatrist that she “kind of remember[ed] bringing John Gacy… to her home in Iowa just before he was arrested.” He wrote in her chart, “She is delusional.”

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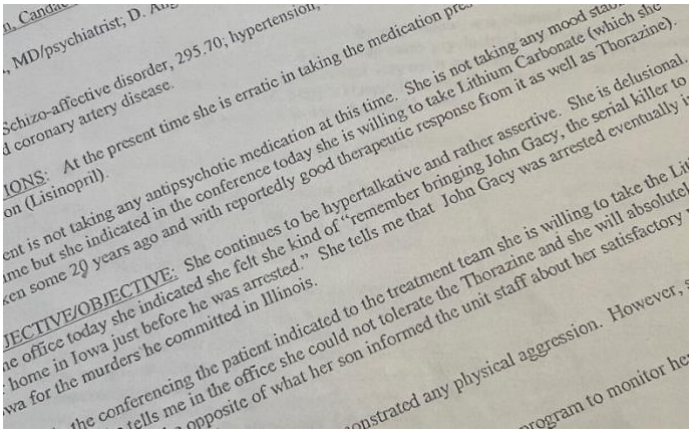
, MD/psychiatrist; D. A
Schizo-affective disorder, 295.70; hypertension,
d coronary artery disease.
IONS: At the present time she is erratic in taking the medication pre
on (Lisinopril).
ent is not taking any antipsychotic medication at this time. She is not taking any mood sta
me but she indicated in the conference today she is willing to take Lithium Carbonate (which she
ken some 20 years ago and with reportedly good therapeutic response from it as well as Thorazine).
JECTIVE/OBJECTIVE: She continues to be hypertalkative and rather assertive. She is delusional.
e office today she indicated she felt she kind of “remember bringing John Gacy, the serial killer to
home in Iowa just before he was arrested.” She tells me that John Gacy was arrested eventually i
wa for the murders he committed in Illinois.
the conferencing the patient indicated to the treatment team she is willing to take the Li
tells me in the office she could not tolerate the Thorazine and she will absolute
opposite of what her son informed the unit staff about her satisfactory
onstrated any physical aggression. However,
rogram to monitor he

Figure 10. Psychiatric records, 2001.

Dad never told us much (nothing at all, really) about his family life in the Piedmont city of Hickory, North Carolina. Nor did he and Mom talk much about themselves between the time they met and the time I was born. From that point on, though, I have something of a handle on the events that shaped my life. First in Tipton—and then Lowden.

I don't remember leaving Tipton and moving to Lowden, but I know it happened in 1971 or '72 when I was three years old. There is no transition point in my memories: no "for sale" sign, no moving truck, no empty houses. The Lowden memories just pick up in a furnished house and a fully realized life where the hazy dreamscape of Tipton leaves off.

I think the Lowden house was the first home my parents owned—Tipton was probably a rental. The house was big, turn-of-the century vintage, a former old-folks home with a curving porch, several (four, five?) bedrooms, a large kitchen, scary attic, and the occasional, strange commercial touch, like a non-functioning intercom in each room.

Figure 11. House on Jefferson Street, Lowden, Iowa.

Lowden was the place where my earliest unassisted memories formed. Birthdays, friendships, school. It's also where hints of unhappiness cast ever-so-slight shadows into the corners of my memory. Parental strife, beginning to understand that Mom was not well, undercurrents of violence, injury.

The house is still there today, although it's been re-sided and a metal roof added. A garage and an addition have been punched out the back, into the yard where the treehouse that

dad built us used to stand. Behind it, the playground where David knocked me off the slide, and I fractured my neck in the fall, has been paved into a parking lot for Trinity Lutheran Church, which stands across the street from the lot. I remember being inside that church—not because we attended, but because my parents sent me to the tiny, brick church school[6] for kindergarten. The other three kinder children and I were in the same classroom as the first- through fourth-graders. Fifth through eighth were in the other classroom. Every Wednesday morning, we would cross the street to the church for some kind of service. They called it "chapel." All I remember is reciting the Lord's Prayer, the "ess"es from "trespasses" hissing off the walls and ceiling.

Figure 12. Former Lutheran school, Lowden, Iowa.

The following year, I attended first grade in a public school. Every morning, I would walk down to the high school to catch the bus, which would take us to Clarence—a dozen or so miles away—where the district's elementary building was located.

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6 The small brick building kitty corner from the church is still there. It looks like it may contain apartments now; it's clearly not a school.

For some time while we lived in Lowden—I can't remember for how long, it may have been a couple weeks or a few months—Mom had a job working the third shift for a company called Misco, in Wilton, which was almost half an hour away. I was probably four or five at the time; David is 20 months younger than me, so he was just getting interesting to be with. Dad still had his own carpentry business then, and I figure Mom took the third shift so Dad could stay with us and sleep while we were sleeping. Mom would usually get home in time for breakfast and often, it seemed, she would bring us books with bright pictures or shiny children's magazines.

Her job at Misco was slapping labels onto catalogs and periodicals, or stuffing envelopes with information and publications people had ordered over the phone or sent away for. Sometimes, if something caught her eye, she'd slip an extra copy or two into her purse and bring it home. These were the first books I remember being given as gifts, and, frankly, I don't know if I even had any books before then. Mom coming home and sitting with me in the morning, letting me hold the books, sound out words, run my fingers over pictures, are my first memories of reading or being read to. I could tell by the way she smiled when she brought us the books that she was happy to give them to us. Her pride was palpable when I was able to make out a word or read a sentence and understand it. Like Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*, I was transported to other worlds, and in my mind the wild rumpus began: I wanted to make my own books. I drew pictures and, eventually, wrote words. I think Mom was encouraged by my love of words and pictures to keep bringing home the books, so in a way, she was stealing to feed my habit, one that she had created by stealing. My desire to read and create lasted well beyond her career at Misco, though. Even into junior high and high school, I was making entire comic books about

the inner lives of my teachers, writing and drawing them with friends—all thanks to Mom and her sticky fingers.

Misco was Mom's first foray into the workforce that I remember, and it marked (for me, anyway) the beginning of the rocky relationship she would have with employment for the rest of her life. I don't know if her periodical pilfering contributed to her eventual separation from Misco—or whose decision it was to cease her employment with the company—but I definitely felt sad when I learned that I'd no longer be enjoying the words and images of a book, or a magazine's slick pages, along with Mom's obvious pleasure in presenting these treasures to us, while I ate my morning Corn Flakes.

One afternoon a week, Mom had to go to Iowa City to for her regular appointment with Dr. Nelson, her psychiatrist. I don't think I knew exactly what a psychiatrist did or why Mom had to see Dr. Nelson, but David and I were always excited to jump into the white, Chevy station wagon and ride along the curving blacktop through the Cedar River valley, past forests and pastures, along corn and bean fields, to I-80 and then zip along the interstate until we pulled onto the tree-lined streets of the college town, neat houses and ivied buildings alternating with bookstores, cafes, and bars.

Dr. Nelson's office was in an old house along a shaded boulevard on the east side of the city. The wooden floors of the lobby creaked a little, but rugs muffled the sound. It smelled almost musty, but not quite—more like old hardbacks in a library or used bookstore. While Mom was with Dr. Nelson, David and I waited in the lobby, playing with the Lincoln Logs or Tinker Toys they kept in a chest for kids like us.

There were also books, including one that I thought was really funny because it was kind of dirty: *How to Teach Your Children About Sex Without Making a Complete Fool of Yourself.* It

was a picture book by the creators of the Berenstain Bears, and it prominently featured a little boy who really enjoyed saying "Penis!" David and I would look at the pictures and yell "Penis!" at one another—drawing looks of surprise and amusement from other folks in the lobby, annoyance from the receptionist.

Too young to take stock of much other than the toys and books in the waiting room, I don't think I really understood just how ill Mom was—not while we lived in Lowden. I knew she had her weekly appointments, but I didn't know what they meant. And it could be that she was doing well during that period and had not been hospitalized for a while. But I don't think that's true—although I don't remember and can't verify it, I think Mom went to the psych ward at least once while we lived in Lowden. I just don't think we were allowed to visit, and I was too young to remember an extended absence. I know she took lithium, on and off, for much of her life. So, the weekly appointments may also have been to monitor her levels.

When Mom had extra money, and even when she didn't, we'd stop by the K-Mart in Iowa City after her appointment. We coveted all the bright, new toys; would chase each other through the aisles, hiding from one another at the center of the circular racks of clothing, then jumping out, trying to scare the other. Mom shopped or simply sat in the cafeteria with a cup of coffee or a Coke, usually in one of the booths, with their curved blue seats and Formica tabletops under blanching fluorescent lights, waiting for us to finish our inventory of what was new and what we wanted.

Sometimes, David and I would get chocolate or butterscotch pudding, always with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles. The announcement of a Blue Light Special over the store's crackling PA system sent us rushing to be first to spot the swirling blue light, like those

atop a police cruiser, no matter what department it was announced in, whether ladies' intimate apparel or automotive parts. It was the light, itself, that was important. While Mom had her job at Misco, we'd even get toys—G.I. Joes, Justice League figures—Batman, Aquaman, Superman, even Wonder Woman—and, of course, PEZ dispensers.

When Mom stopped working at Misco, I didn't know right away. I don't think Dad did, either—it seems Mom kept leaving the house at night to "go to work" for at least a few days, anyway, after she no longer had work to go to. What I do know is that when Mom was able to hold down a job, she felt "normal"—and I think it probably fed her need to escape from whatever was caging her, whether it was the Mitchellville she carried with her in her mind or being trapped in a house with kids, for just a little while. She probably kept leaving the house for a few hours every night because, with the excuse of a job, she could.

One night, Dad shook me awake.

"Wake up your brother and come to the kitchen," he said. "Hurry up."

"But why…"

"Just do it. Hurry up." He left the room, and I could hear his boots echo down the stairs, and then across the floor below us. I went to David's bed and pushed his shoulder. He rolled over, breathing out of his mouth.

"David! Get up!" Nothing. He was always hard to wake up when he was little. But I knew a secret. I put my hand into his pajamas, found his ribs and started playing them like a washboard. His eyes shot open; he squealed and writhed.

"Stop! Stop tickling! Stop!!"

"Then get up." I stood back, ready to start in again. "Dad says."

David's face opened into a gaping yawn, then he rubbed his eyes and slid his pajama-footied feet onto the varnished wooden floor. He skated along the floorboards until we got to the stairs and walked down to the kitchen, where we found Dad smoking a cigarette and filling his thermos from a pot of coffee he'd just made.

"Help David put his coat on."

"But we're wearing our jammies," I said gesturing up and down with one hand, as if showing off my finery.

"It's okay, we're just going to be in the truck," he said. "Come on—hurry up." I put my coat on and, as I was helping David with his, I saw Dad reach up into a cupboard and take down a brown, triangular case, about the size of a large slice of pizza.

"Is that your pistol?" I asked as we stumbled out of the house toward Dad's beatup, red F-150 pickup in the driveway.

"Yup. Let's go—get in the truck." Dad picked David up and slid him to the center of the truck's bench seat. I sat down next to him, and Dad slammed the door shut behind me. He went around to the passenger side, set the thermos of coffee on the seat between David and his thigh and propped the pistol, still in its soft-sided case, now partially unzipped, up against the seat behind the thermos. He started up the truck. I could smell the exhaust coming up through small, rusted-out holes in the floorboard, combining with the old, dusty odor of the vinyl and sponge seat as well as the oil the truck both burned and leaked. In the daytime, you could look down through the floorboard and see the pavement, or sometimes gravel, speeding by beneath the truck. I couldn't see anything in the darkness of that night other than the green lights of the dashboard and the way they illumined Dad's face in a malevolent hue.

“Where are we going?” David asked. Dad reached up to the flaking chrome lever on the column, pulled the truck into reverse, put his arm along the length of the bench seat and looked back, over his shoulder, his profile bathed in green. He backed the truck out of the driveway and onto Jefferson, our street, and pulled the lever into first.

“We’re going to go find your mother,” he said, goosing the truck into motion, shifting into second and gaining speed. He first drove over toward the Alibi, a tavern on the other side of Highway 30. The lights were still on, but there were only a couple of cars in the lot. Then he got on the highway and drove all the way to Clarence—eight miles away—where we cruised slowly past the bars and watering holes lining the streets there. Not finding what he was looking for, Dad turned the pickup around and headed back to Lowden.

Finally, tired, confused and little worried, if not scared, I had to ask. I’d figured David would have by now, but he hadn’t. “Where’s Mom?”

“I don’t know.” He kept his eyes straight ahead on the road, his hands gripping the top of the steering wheel as we sped eastward. “That’s why we’re looking for her.”

“Isn’t she at work?”

Dad seemed to squeeze tighter, pushed his knuckles forward, farther over the top of the wheel.

“I don’t think so. That’s why we have to find her.”

When we got to the edge of town, Dad turned left off the highway, crossed the railroad tracks and drove all the way to the end of the westernmost street in Lowden. Then he turned right, went a block, turned again, and drove southward down the next street all the way back to the highway. I guess we were going to drive up and down every street in town. David was asleep, pressed into my shoulder, eyes closed, mouth open. I was starting to drift off, myself.

Dad had lit up a Marlboro and managed to pour some coffee into the lid of his thermos with one hand.

We had gone up and down most of Lowden's north-south streets and were back on Jefferson, heading down toward highway once again. Dad must have been spacing a little bit, himself, because he didn't slow down before we hit the berm of the railroad tracks. All three of us rose off the seat. Dad may have hit his head on the roof. Hot coffee rose out of the thermos lid in his hand, and came down on his lap and on David, who screamed and flailed his arms, knocking the pistol down over the thermos. A sharp, deafening sound filled the cab of the pickup. I screamed but I couldn't hear anything—my head was ringing and throbbing. I could see David crying, absolutely out of his mind, snot and tears running down his face, mouth open as wide as his yawn, eyes closed, hands clasped against his ears. I couldn't hear him.

An acrid smell of July Fourth fireworks filled the car.

At the top of the windshield, there was a perfectly round hole, surrounded by a white corona—in the dark, under the white streetlights, it looked like an evil sun: black circle shooting out blinding white rays.

Dark windows in the nearby houses illuminated. First one, then another, and another. Dad threw his cup on the floorboard, gunned the pickup and made a U-turn. We sped up the street. He turned the truck into our driveway, quickly shut off the engine and killed the lights. He picked up David, grabbed the pistol.

"Trent, get inside. Now!" It looked like he was shouting, but his voice sounded like it was coming through a pillow. Holding David and the pistol with the same hand, he reached over, grabbed my arm and pulled me across the bench seat, knocking the thermos onto the floor of the truck, and out the driver's side. He kicked the pickup door closed, rushed us up onto the porch

and into the house, where we sat for several minutes in the dark, Dad keeping watch out the windows. Finally, when nothing happened, he took us upstairs and tucked us into bed.

By morning, my hearing had returned to normal: the sounds of shouting, pounding, and breaking glass from downstairs rang clear in my ears. I couldn't make out exactly what they were saying to each other, but, at least, Mom was home.

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Sometime during my first-grade year, Dad fell off a roof and broke his back. He was laid up in the hospital at the University of Iowa for a long time. I remember going with Mom and David to visit him, and for some reason, we weren't allowed inside on the ward. Instead, we had to stand on the grass outside the redbrick building, window rimmed with limestone, blue skies and full trees above us, and talk with him through the screen, our conversation punctuated with birdsong and the occasional passing car. Dad lay on his stomach and was not allowed to turn over or move.

When he was finally discharged, he had to wear a smooth, plastic brace that covered his back and chest and cinched tight along the sides, like a flesh-colored super hero uniform.

He also couldn't work.

So, we moved out of our house in Lowden[7] and into the Broadmoor Apartments on Emerald Street in Iowa City. Dad started working in the steam shop at the University of Iowa—thanks to his experience in the Norfolk shipyards and as a plumber's apprentice back in North Carolina. He was also a part-time maintenance man at the apartment complex in exchange for a discount on our rent.

Figure 13. Former Broadmoor Apartments, Iowa City, Iowa.

[7] Later, I learned that my parents had filed for bankruptcy because Dad couldn't continue his construction business due to his back injury. His days of self-employment over, we lost the house in Lowden.

I was six. I continued first grade at Ernest Horn Elementary, which was just across Emerald and up the hill from our apartment, in Mrs. Lopos' class. I learned to swim at the pool in our apartment complex, to which Dad had a key and could let us in, even when it was closed to other residents. It was a time when we had the pool all to ourselves that he picked me up and threw me into the shallow (three feet) end and yelled, "Swim!"

Figure 14. Ernest Horn Elementary, Iowa City, Iowa.

Barely three feet tall, myself, I couldn't stand on my toes and breathe at the same time. Instead, panicking, I bounced off the bottom, gulped air when my nose and mouth breached the surface, and sank again, as I tried to hop to the ladder so I could get the hell out of the pool. Meanwhile, Dad had jumped into the water and was blocking my escape route. I had to bounce to a wall and hold myself up on the edge of the pool, where Dad pried me off, over my crying protests, and showed me how to hold my breath and dog paddle.

After thirty minutes or so, I was swimming on my own, loving it, and proud of myself. But I've never really forgiven Dad for just tossing me into the pool like that—especially after six years of being admonished to stay away from water, to watch out for undertows, to always wear a life jacket. Yet, there he was, throwing me into water that was over my head with no line, no life jacket, and no explanation—and laughing while he did it.

I guess independence was the point, and growing up in Iowa City, followed by its smallish suburbs of Coralville and North Liberty, is most certainly where David and I got our

first taste of independence. Willow Creek ran behind our apartment building, all the way to Willow Creek Park several blocks and a whole world away, and it was our escape route.

We would splash down the length of the creek, passing through the culvert under Benton Street, and scramble up the willowed hill before it got too deep as it widened into the park. Along the way, we'd turn over rocks and try to catch crawdads or bring fishing poles and pull little bullheads, their fins stinging our hands if we weren't careful, out of the slow-moving, brown water.

Willow Creek was an oasis in the midst of several housing developments. Its banks were lined with small willows and bigger cottonwoods, creating a forested pathway through the backyards of the nicer houses in the University Heights neighborhood. We had friends whose houses backed onto the creek—the Waltzes and Lavalles—and others in Westgate apartments across the stream from our own complex. For us, the creek was both a highway (we really didn't know any other way to get to our friends' houses) and another world. We'd smear mud on our faces and turn sticks into spears, pretend to hunt or battle amongst ourselves, splashing into the water, running into the culverts, climbing trees, dropping mud bombs and launching projectiles at one another.

I tell you right now, I think every kid should grow up with a creek and some woods in their back yard. David and I were lucky because that first apartment complex and the one Mom ended up moving to, Villa Brun in Coralville, after the divorce, both had creeks and woods to play and hide and lose ourselves in. When Mom and Dad fought, or Mom was talking to the voices or there was nothing but condiments in the refrigerator, we could always just duck into the woods and find ourselves in another world.

Dangerous? Maybe. By today's standards, anyway. I certainly wouldn't have let my six or seven- or eight-year-old kids go play by themselves near a body of water in the urban woods. But, in a way, I don't think I would have made it through some of my childhood as intact as I managed to without a place to lose myself in the natural world.

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"They took your mama in *a* ambulance, they took your mama in *a* ambulance!" Darrel danced toward us with his fucked up hair as we walked into the wide, square courtyard of our lowslung, brick apartment complex, on the way home from school; Darrel, who was younger than us, not old enough for school; Darrel, who got our asses beat because he told his mama that it was us who cut the gouges through the impossibly tight curls of his hair, and his mama told our mom, who told our dad, who whipped us with his belt, not on our asses, but just below, so it stung and raised welts on the backs of our legs, while we cried for him to stop.

Darrel, whose mama was in their apartment, in their kitchen, and not in an ambulance.

I hope Darrel learned his lesson: if you don't want fucked up hair, don't ask a seven-year-old white kid to cut it. I learned mine: no matter how much they beg, never cut somebody else's hair. As for David, I don't know: He does his own fuckin' thing.

Other than Darrel, what I remember most from that day is emptiness. The emptiness of our apartment after school. Dark, no Mom. Dad not home from work. Quiet. No snacks, no smells of buttery grilled cheese or farty boiled eggs; no TV tuned to *Guiding Light* or *As the World Turns*; no Crystal Gayle on the console stereo. Just me and David alone in the apartment, not sure what to do. It wasn't the first time Mom had been taken away in an ambulance, but it was the first time we ended up alone when it happened. Dad had always been there before.

I think our phone worked that time, sometimes they cut it off because it got too expensive, but I wouldn't have known who to call—Dad worked in the miles of steam tunnels beneath the buildings on the University of Iowa campus, patching leaks, wrapping pipes in asbestos tape, arms of steel in heatproof casts, keeping the steam moving. Unavailable by phone.

Because I was oldest, I decided I was in charge. I turned on the TV to *The Dr. Max Show*, a local afternoon program with Bugs Bunny cartoons, hosted by an octogenarian talking head

and his sidekick, Mombo, whose makeup was a bit shaky and slapdash for a professional television clown.[8] I parked my kindergartener brother in front of the TV and set myself to making a bowl of cereal for each of us. A trail of dried blood, like the linoleum tiles had sprouted little round scabs, dotted the kitchen floor; the family-sized box of generic, O-shaped oat cereal unwieldy in my hands; the gallon of milk almost too heavy for me to pour without spilling.

It was starting to get dark when we heard Dad's booted feet on the concrete outside the door. David and I were on sprawled on the floor watching a *Hogan's Heroes* rerun, empty cereal bowls on the coffee table. "Get these dishes cleaned up," he said and walked through to his and Mom's bedroom. As I returned from putting our bowls and spoons in the sink, I saw Dad walk from the bedroom, across the short hall, to the apartment's only bathroom. I still wasn't used to seeing him with a beard, white, nicotine-stained and bristly, long enough to hide the fact that most of his lower lip had been removed when they cut out his first skin cancer but not yet the Santa Claus-size he'd wear for the rest of his life. His hands carried several brown, prescription pill bottles of varying shapes. I followed him into the bathroom.

"Dad, did they take Mom in an ambulance?" He nodded. Dad had put the pill bottles in the sink; he picked one up, popped the lid into the wastebasket, emptied the contents into the toilet, tossed the bottle into the trash, and picked up another. I saw that David was standing in the doorway watching.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

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8 Okay, I probably shouldn't be too rough on Dr. Max. David and I loved the show. A couple times a week, a local scout troop was trotted into the studio and their faces broadcast across eastern Iowa for all the other kids sitting at home to gaze upon with envy. So, when my Cub Scout troop got the nod for "Dr. Max"—to meet Max and Mombo in real life and *to be on TV!*—I talked about it for a week before, and still rub it in David's face to this day that I was on *The Dr. Max Show,* and he wasn't.

"I'm getting rid of these damn pills."

"How come?"

"Because your mother overdosed. Again." I knew the word. I knew it meant she'd taken too many pills, and it made it her sick.

"Is that why the ambulance came?" He nodded and poured clear liquid from a bottle marked HALDOL into the toilet bowl's eddying kaleidoscope of capsules, caplets, and pills in water pinkish with sloughed-off dye. The unease that I'd felt being alone with no word from our parents, briefly salved by Dad's coming home, started pricking my spine and scalp once again. My stomach hurt. I wanted to see Mom.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"I hope so." He finished up the last bottle and flushed. The swirling pharmacopoeia spun hypnotically, gaining speed as it spiraled downward, and then disappeared with a suck into the apartment building's plumbing—and then off to dull the senses and calm the psychoses of fish and turtles and mussels in some nearby waterway.

"When is Mommy coming home?" asked David. Dad turned and tousled his hair.

"I don't know, Cricket. But I'll take you boys to see her as soon as we can, okay?" We nodded. But the stone of emptiness still weighed in my gut.

A few nights later, something woke me, and I had to pee. I slid down from my bunk, and as I walked past the door to my parents' bedroom toward the bathroom, I heard a low, guttural moaning, and what sounded like panting, keeping time with the quiet, rhythmic squeaking of bed springs. The door was open a crack, and alarmed at the sounds, I wondered if Dad was alright. I looked in and I saw, in the light coming through the window from the parking lot, the figure of a naked woman straddling my father's prone body. It wasn't Mom. They were both moving, and

when she turned her face into the light, I recognized her. Darrell, whose mother was in my parents' bed, on top of Dad.

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Not long after we'd moved to Iowa City and while we lived in the Broadmoor Apartments on Emerald Street, maybe 1975 or '76, Mom worked at the truck stop out on the edge of town, off I-80 in Coralville. Although it was technically the Hawk-I Truck Plaza, we always just called it "The Truck Stop," and these days, it's probably one of those big chains, like Love's or Flying J, with a Subway, Cinnabon, and Burger King attached.

Back then, though, it was a magical place. David and I loved to explore all the glass cases and counters and browse all the latest in trucker technology: CB radios, fuzz busters, knives, all manner of rubbers, lubes, and sex toys; and they sold Iowa souvenirs, like magnets, enameled spoons, and bumper stickers. I was amazed at the trucker's lounge, with its rows of cushy-looking chairs with little, black and white, coin-operated TVs built into their arms. Truckers could also rent a shower or a bed by the hour if they needed to sleep—or whatever. Most importantly, though, the Truck Stop also had a café, which, even before Mom started waitressing there, was one of our favorite places to eat.

Coffee was the predominant smell—and all the tables and booths were pushed up against windows, so you could look out and watch the Kenworths and Peterbilts and Freightliners rumble onto the lot and line up for the night, their parking lights a line of glowing orange marching toward the horizon—or at least toward the Red Stallion, the strip club on the far side of the truck parking area. David and I loved that each booth had its own individual juke box—*you could play a song for a dime!*—loaded mostly with country standards and songs specifically geared toward trucking, which was a thing back in the seventies.[9] When Mom worked at the truck stop, Dad would take us there to eat pretty often. I loved the hamburgers, the open-faced,

9 *See* C.W. McCall, Jerry Reed, etc.

hot beef sandwiches (a couple slices of white bread, topped with roast beef and mashed potatoes and then slathered in gravy), and the homemade pie. The California burger was my favorite, the juice of the lettuce and tomatoes, the tang of the mayo, offered a perfect counterpoint to the sweet, buttergrilled bun and the grease of the sizzling beef patty. Every bite was a savory combination of cool and warm, soft and crunchy, salt and acid. A sip of Coke and a crinklecut French fry or two were an ideal coda to each mouthful of burger.

Mom would make friends with the truckers. One time, she brought home two cases of popcorn that a driver had given her. The packets were divided in two, with one pouch for the popcorn kernels and a smaller one filled with butter flavoring; so you could pop the popcorn and, when it was done, just squeeze the golden liquid on top: buttery tasting popcorn all in a single package! It was one of the coolest things I'd seen. Apparently, the cartons were damaged or had "fallen off the truck," so the driver gave some to Mom.

Another time, Mom brought home a teenage hitchhiker who stayed with us a while. I don't remember his name. David and I took him to the creek that ran behind our apartments, between us and the Westgate complex, and showed him how to look for crawdads and how you could hike all the way downstream, through the culvert under Benton Street, to Willow Creek Park. I also showed him how you could pull up the dried reeds along the creek by the roots—which were dry and pointy—and use them as a ready-made spear. He tested his out on me and hit me square in the forehead. It hurt a lot, and I was bleeding pretty bad.

Mom had to take me to the emergency room where I had to get stitches, which I was pretty excited about. You see, Jeff Crowley had to get stitches after he cut his arm on a rock, and when they were taken out, he brought them—all seven—in a little plastic bag to show and tell. I only needed three stitches, but even so, as soon as they came out, I was going to bring them to

show and tell. Even though I thought it was okay, Dad was pretty mad. He didn't like that Mom had brought this boy stay with us in the first place, and now that he had hit me in the forehead with a spear, Dad said he couldn't stay with us anymore. He made him pack up his things and then drove him to the bus station. I wish I remembered his name.

Another time, Mom called and said she wasn't coming home for a few days. She was going to ride to Chicago with one her trucker friends in his rig. I was a little jealous, because I'd always wanted to see the inside of one of those big cabs with the sleeper on the back. It was like having your own house with you wherever you went. All your things mobile, and in one place. You didn't need a bedroom, or an apartment, or a house or anybody. Just you and your things and your truck.

At the time it made no sense to me, why would she just leave with a trucker? But looking back at her life, it wasn't so unusual was it? Mom ran away at sixteen, and relied on the kindness of truckers to get her to a point where she joined up with the carnival—itself a nomadic caravan of trucks. When she met and left with Dad, she was running away with another trucker. To her, the big rigs and the road meant freedom, and working at the truck stop, I think, fed the need to run that she developed in Mitchellville. Running off for a day or two was like the cutting she did with razor blades on the back of her arms: It relieved the pressure, and kept her from doing "the real thing." Ultimately, it kept her with us.

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Dad had tried to ease us into the idea. He brought Marion to breakfast with us in July, then, she had come along on a Saturday hike at Lake McBride. To us, Marion was "Dad's friend"—we didn't know any better—despite what'd happened when we stopped to pick her up on that August day.

Marion was not expecting Dad to bring us. When we pulled up, David, who was six, jumped out of the car and ran up to the side door on the house next to the driveway.

"Is it this one?" he hollered. Dad nodded, and David began to pound.

The door opened slowly, revealing a naked Marion, no glasses even, her myopic eyes squinting in the morning sun, her skin white in the light. David, confronted with a pie-slice of black pubic bush at face-level, stretched his mouth and screamed. Marion echoed his scream and slammed the door shut in the poor kid's face. It took Dad almost an hour to calm her down and convince her to come along, anyway; while he sweettalked, David and I waited on the front porch of the duplex. I guess Dad worried for a few minutes that the incident was going to be the end of his relationship, but I guess he got the situation under control.

Not long after, he told Mom that he wanted a divorce. She didn't seem surprised. I suppose Dad figured she'd answered the phone too many times only to have the caller pause and hang up, and he was sure she'd heard us kids talk about "Dad's friend."

"I'm not going to tell the kids," she said. "I didn't ask for the divorce. And I'm going out now."

Mom didn't come home that night. Or the next.

"Where's Mom?" We asked, worried that she might have overdosed or been back on the road with another trucker.

“She’ll be home soon. She’s in the hospital again,” Dad said.

“Can we go visit her?”

“No,” Dad said. “We can’t.”

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Year later, I was scanning the Cedar River valley on Google Earth, looking for a place called the Sand Pits. It was a spot where my Dad took us as kids. I have a few photos of us there, and looking at the pictures, I remembered being happy in that place. But I haven't been back since I was in grade school.

I tried an internet search and nothing came up. How could a place that I'd visited so many times as a child, a place that bore such significance that I was now trying to find it four decades later, have never existed? Returning to the satellite imagery, I scanned the edges of the river again, and a label popped up: "West Rochester Sand Pit." That had to be it. I'd been sure it was on the other side of the river (I didn't remember having to cross a bridge), but it wasn't. Nor was it the Sand "Pits"—apparently there was only ever one. But it was there. And I was relieved I wasn't losing my mental faculties and that I hadn't lost this part of my childhood, as I had so many others: parents dead, their memories with them; thanks to multiple moves, divorces and rentals, no homes to return to or visit; nor did I have many real artifacts from my upbringing.

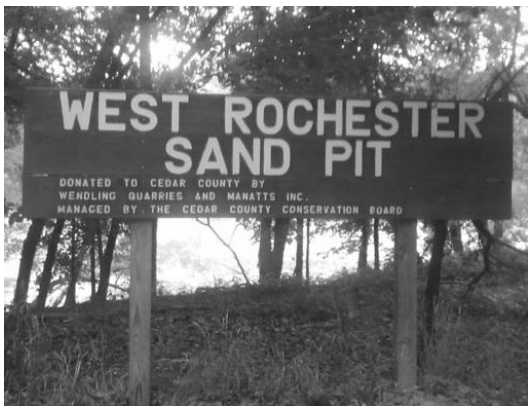

Figure 15. The "Sand Pits," Rochester, Iowa.

Instead, when my kids queried me about my youth, I took them to *places*. I showed Henry and Lizzie my favorite hills and trails, rivers and trout streams, bluffs and waterfalls. I made them eat pizza from Pagliai's and cheer for the Hawkeyes at Kinnick Stadium. But they would never know what it was like to sit around a fire and listen to my Dad tell stories or to taste some of the crazy things Mom created—"Spanish chow mein"—in her cluttered, smoky kitchen. They would never see their father's childhood bedroom full of toys, posters, felt sports pennants

and memorabilia, or childhood photos of me and David on the walls or mantels of a grandparent's home.

And that's how I found myself looking at a satellite image of a blob of brown-green water, gouged from a small patch of riverbottom forest in eastern Iowa. For the first eight years of my life, this was what I thought of as the "real" outdoors. It's where I fished and camped with Dad (and sometimes Mom), and where I explored the forest and sandy banks with David, often as pirates or Indians: living off the land, looking for treasure, stalking through the trees with spears made of fragrant willow branches.

Recently divorced, after seventeen years of marriage, I was thinking about a trip with my kids, and for a reason I couldn't quite pinpoint, the Sand Pits came to mind. I'd shown the children my eastern Iowa stomping grounds before—and the idea of going "home" for a few days occasionally seemed comforting—but I'd never before thought about taking them to that spot. I hadn't been there in over forty years, myself.

When I was four or five, I would sit on Dad's lap in the beat-up, faded-blue International Harvester pickup—a bolt with two silver-dollar-sized washers, one inside and one out, disguised the bullet hole in the windshield—and "steer" over the bumpy gravel track that led to the old quarry. Dad always kept a finger on the bottom of the wheel, though. The parking area was just a sandy opening in the trees, a flaking-paint, wood-plank sign pointing the way down a sand trail into the woods. You could never see the Cedar River—it was hidden from view by a thick growth of underbrush, poplars, and box elders on the sand bar between the river and the pit—but

it made its presence known: river bottom forest; freshwater smells that mixed with the bitterish tang of young willows; and freshwater mussels, huge carp, and monstrous northern pike that emerged from the murky quarry water.

Figure 16. Trent and his brother (holding freshwater mussels) at the Sand Pits.

Before Dad got the red, fiberglass canoe, I'd stand on the eroded banks with David and Dad, and we'd cast our lines out into the brown-green water.

"It's over a hundred foot in there, some places," Dad would say. "Stay out of the water. And watch your rods."

Sometimes, Dad had to secure David to a bush with a fish stringer—one end clipped to a belt loop or bib-overall strap and the other wrapped once around a little willow or poplar and clipped back through its own chain links—to keep him out of the water.

When I was six, we moved to Iowa City, thirty miles west of the Sand Pits, where Dad went to work as a steamfitter at the university. The work hours and the distance (and newfound fishing spots closer to home, on the Iowa River) meant less-frequent visits to the Sand Pits. So, when my eighth birthday rolled around, I asked if we could go camping and fishing like we used to, and Dad agreed. Mom didn't want to join us.

Figure 17. Trent and his brother in front of a Wickiup at the Sand Pits.

When the day came, Dad corralled David and me into the old pickup, and we headed for the Sand Pits. We spent the day fishing and canoeing, hiking in

the woods. I don't think we owned a tent—or at least we never seemed to use one—and that was one of my favorite things about camping at the Sand Pits: Dad built a wickiup for us to sleep in. To start, he would find a stand of young willows, and within that stand, a space where four or five trees circled an area maybe seven feet in diameter. Dad pulled the treetops together and tied them to make a frame. Meanwhile, David and I gathered the leafiest, most flexible branches we could find from other trees and wove them into the frame, careful to leave an entrance. Then we piled more leaves and grass on the floor of the shelter, covered it with a tarp, and laid our sleeping bags down on top of it all. Dad threw another tarp over the top of the structure in case of rain.

That night, around the campfire, we looked at the stars and ate hot dogs that we'd cooked on sticks whittled to points and passed around beans heated up right in the can. Then we used our hot dog sticks to roast marshmallows. As the coals began to glow brightly, licked intermittently by a blue tongue of flame, Dad quietly, and without preface, said he and Mom were going to be divorced.

Figure 18. Trent, his brother, and Dad at the Sand Pits.

We sat in silence, staring at the fire. Nobody spoke, but I don't think any of us wanted to be there any longer. I wanted to see Mom, and David probably did, too. Dad stood up and poured the mostly full pot of coffee on the fire. I guess he didn't want to stay out there after delivering the news. He probably wanted to go to Marion's. In the dark, I found my pocketknife and cut the twine dad had used to tie together the top of the wickiup. The willows sprung back in slow motion, and the

rain tarp slid to the ground in the beam of Dad's flashlight. David picked up the sleeping bags, and Dad picked up the tarps. We put everything in the truck and drove home. I began to feel the same kind of emptiness that had settled into my belly when Mom had gone to the hospital and I didn't know where she or Dad were.

Looking at Google Earth on the screen, the deep green trees in the satellite image of the Sand Pits were inscrutable. I couldn't see what was beneath them, whether there might still be a wickiup, or Dad, or my eight-year-old self. I realized that night when Dad had announced the divorce was last time I had ever visited the Sand Pits, and I remembered why I'd never gone back.

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After the divorce, Dad moved with Marion into a small house on a farm owned by Dick Stoner, out near North Liberty, a few miles north of Iowa City. Stoner and his wife lived in another house on the property, and their son occupied the third home on the farm. For a while, at least during that first summer after the divorce, David and I lived with Dad and Marion on the Stoner farm. There was a giant weeping willow near on the property, and that tree was everything to us: fort, castle, hiding place, raw material. We'd spend entire days under the tree, climbing it, sitting against it, cutting the ropy branches off and braiding them into ropes, hiding. Not far from the tree was an underground grain storage bin, maybe twenty feet deep, where garter snakes denned during the winter. One spring, when the bin was empty of corn, Mr. Stoner pulled open the metal doors to show us the writhing mass of black and yellow snakes on the floor of the bin. After that, I stayed away from it, but each summer a garter snake or two would startle me in our yard, darting between the blades of grass at my feet or lying coiled against a tree stump. David and I spent a lot of time outside because we weren't allowed inside, except to use the bathroom or for lunch, because Dad said Marion needed a lot of quiet time when he was at work.

Marion was a law student at the University of Iowa and also happened to be in the MFA program at the Writer's Workshop. Dad, who was working in the university's steam shop, had met her on campus. She was studying outside, and he was working on a steamline under a pedestrian bridge near the river. It was a major repair, so he'd had to return to the site daily for more than a week. Marion was always in the same spot. He'd said "Hello" and introduced himself as the "troll under the bridge." I guess she liked that.

Like him, she was from North Carolina. But she was also more than twenty years younger than him. He grew up dirt poor in Catawba County; her dad worked for IBM in Charlotte. Nevertheless, they saw enough in each other to to hook up, and eventually get

married. The wedding happened in the summer of 1977 or ’78. I don’t remember which. They were married at a church in North Liberty, just down the road from the Stoner farm. Most of the folks who came to the wedding were Marion’s friends and family, and by that time, I recognized many of them from parties at our house or readings that I’d attended with Dad and Marion at Prairie Lights bookstore, on campus, or at other book houses around town. Marvin Bell, Vance Bourjaily, Paul and Hualing Engle, James McPherson, Sandra Cisneros (whom Dad, inexplicably, called “Gus”). At the time, I really had no idea who these people were other than friends of Marion and Dad. It was a confusing time for me as a kid, and it was only after I got to college that I wished I’d paid more attention or simply known better.

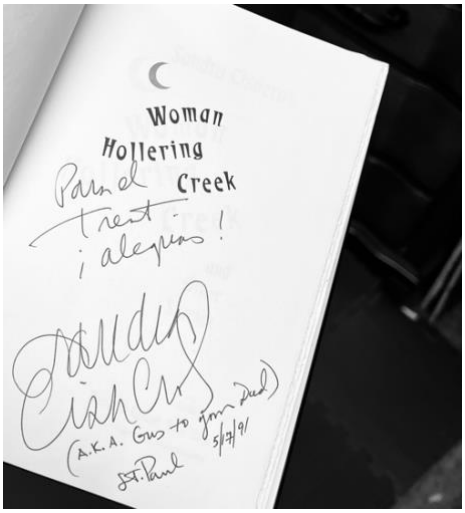

Figure 19. Inscription “A.K.A. Gus to your Dad” from Sandra Cisneros.

At nine and ten years old, though, I didn’t know what to think or feel. Marion wasn’t always particularly nice to us, but I won a lot more of her favor than David because I showed considerable interest in what she did. Readings fascinated me—it was the late 70s, and we’d be crowded into these shops, chairs surrounded by stacks and stacks of books, books unlike anything they sold at K-Mart. There was almost always incense burning, and urns of coffee and hot water with styrofoam cups and Lipton teabags and a jar of CoffeeMate. And grown-ups would read to each other, and everyone would be rapt, listening, and then applaud when the reading was done. Sometimes, I didn’t get it. Or sometimes, I was hooked, especially if there was swearing or sex or naked women. When they read poetry, I was mostly bored, but every now and then, the words felt just right, like a song or a drumbeat, and you could feel them going in through your ears and coursing out through your limbs, thumping

in your chest and tingling in your toes and fingertips. I didn't know what to make of them, exactly, but I began to understand just how powerful words were, and that the people reading these words weren't like parents reading to kids, but the people who had *actually written them.* They had created the books that they were reading.

I remember when Marion was having her MFA thesis bound and printed—and it was literally like watching a book being made. One summer day, David and I went with her, while Dad was at work, over to West Branch, where a man with thick glasses, long, stringy black hair, and the massive black beard of a Cossack invited us into a workshop below his house. We walked around to the side of the white clapboard house, down a few concrete stairs and through a wooden door, its green paint flaking off. He wore a white, collared shirt and a heavy apron. His fingers were stained with ink. We watched as he set rows and rows of type in boxes, each box a page of Marion's poetry chapbook, while Marion read backwards over his shoulder, watching as he went. I think we had to return a couple times, and once, while he was setting type or running prints, or something, Marion took us to visit the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, which held little interest for David and me. What kind of library doesn't let you check out books, anyway?

Watching Marion's book being made was tedious, boring, seemed to take forever, but at the same time, was riveting. To see a book built from the ground up, letter by letter, page by page, was, to my young mind, amazing. *So, that's how they do it!* Of course, I had no idea that the books I was used to checking out from the library and reading were not printed on artisanal presses, using type hand-set by besmocked men in their own cellars. I knew I didn't want to spend anymore sunny summer days watching the process, but I was sure glad I had seen it, and I can still recall the stinging smell of the ink and the scent of fresh paper to this day.

When Marion finally brought home the books in two big boxes, I was almost excited as she was to see them. They were beautiful. Blue-gray covers, a red gracenote among the words of the title, hand bound with linen thread. But I was also disappointed because the covers were… just paper. They didn't feel much different from the pages. They weren't what I expected when I thought of "books," but even so, I loved them. Marion even signed one and gave it to me. Later, though, when I tried to read it, I was flummoxed. Strongly influenced by Russian poetry (she was a translator, as well as a writer), her verse was impenetrable for my young mind. To this day, I don't think I've ever finished her short collection; and I couldn't even begin to guess where my copy of it ended up.

Marion also came with a lot of photocopying and highlighters. She carried bags and bags of highlighters, mostly yellow and green, with the occasional pink or orange marker tossed in for those times when she need additional contrast (concurring opinions, maybe?). I remember a lot of time spent at copyshops on campus, waiting for things to be copied or picking up photocopied packets for her classes. Whenever I had to go to Kinko's for a class in college, the sounds and smells took me right back to those summers when Marion was still in school, and David and I had to tag along on her errands.

That wasn't always the case, though. Sometimes, we were dropped off with a babysitter. I guess Mom must have been in the hospital, again; otherwise, why not just take us to her apartment? On those mornings, Marion would leave us with a woman named Velma Breese in Coralville, and I think David would agree with me that those were some of the worst summer days, ever. I assume they must have found her in the classifieds of the *Press Citizen* or on a bulletin board or something like that, because we'd never seen her before the summer she watched us, and we never saw her again.

Velma seemed ancient to us, though she was probably only in her fifties. She was slow-moving and wore polyester, elastic shorts that stretched around her ample waist and revealed white, blue-veined calves between her wrinkled knees and her loose-hanging, yellowed ankle socks. Her stingy hair was straight and white, parted down the center, framing her sallow face with its narrow brown eyes and thin lips that looked as if they'd never once had cause to smile. When she opened her mouth to talk, there was a hole where her upper-right canine tooth should have been.

Velma's house was small and smoke stained. It smelled like stale bread. She lived there with her husband, Merle, and two chihuahuas, Peewee and Skipper. Peewee was the smaller of the two, tan, stocky, and mean. He growled and barked at us, and if we ever got too close, lunged with bared teeth toward our ankles. Skipper was a taller, longer legged dog—maybe a cross between a whippet and a chihuahua. He was speckled black and white, pointy-nosed, with one cloudy, cataract-covered eye. Skipper was missing several teeth, always shivered like he'd been left out in the cold, and smelled like sour meat. David and I were terrified of the dogs, afraid one would bite us and simply grossed out by the other. The house's décor added little comfort. On the wall of the entryway was a snot green clock in the shape of a cat, its two slitted eyes looking to the left and to the right with each tick of the second hand, as the curled tail moved in the opposite direction. David and I still talk about how creeped out we were by that clock—and thanks to people's renewed love of retro kitsch, such clocks are not hard to find these days and trigger me every time I see one.

The main things I remember about our days at the Breeses' is that we almost never went inside, and we were always hungry. Sometimes, we'd get dropped off with lunch. I remember at least once being left with Wonder Bread sandwiches containing nothing but onions and Miracle

Whip. I don't remember much more than that lunch-wise, but I do remember feeling like we missed a few lunches at the Breeses' house. I also feel like we weren't allowed to go into the house when we were there; or maybe we were just afraid. Either way, we generally stayed out of Velma's way. Fortunately, they had a fine weeping willow in their backyard, as well. So, David and I had that to work with, and that's where I remember spending most of our time there: underneath the willow tree.

On the days that Velma was supposed to be watching David and me, Merle would often sit in the garage with the door open, drinking beer and smashing cans. His chair in the garage was surrounded by huge clear bags full of cans of all sorts, Coke, Pepsi, Hamm's, Mountain Dew, Coors, Schlitz, Old Style. At his feet was a board with a metal holder that was just big enough to hold a twelve-ounce can. Two metal rails rose up from the board, and along this, he could lift and drop a heavy post. When he put a can in the holder and dropped the post, it came out flat as a pancake. He threw the flattened cans into a dented metal trash can with a clank. All day long we'd hear *pause-smash-clank* from the garage. And if we ever dared to stop and watch, he drop the post and bellow at us to get the hell away.

He was a thick, stocky man who wore a white t-shirt tucked over his beer gut into blue jeans that were held up with suspenders over his shoulders, and a blue-and-white striped engineer's cap that hid close-cropped gray hair. He had one eye that didn't quite open, while the other gaped wide, and seemed to gaze with the fury of a man who realized he was closer to death than he was to fourth grade and full of resentment for it. Merle wore thick boots and had one foot that was turned outward, unnaturally. On that leg, two metal rods extended upward from the bottom of his foot, along either side of his calf, to his knee, where they seemed to be bolted in. Consequently, he swayed awkwardly to the side with every step he took. It was painful to watch

him walk. Afraid of Merle, we did our best to avoid him when he was in the garage smashing his cans. One day, though, just after we were dropped off, Merle appeared.

"You two are coming with me today," he said. Terrified, we followed him out to the driveway and got into a rusted white pickup whose rust-chewed fenders were practically eaten away. We rode in silence for several blocks, concerned but curious where Merle was taking us. When we pulled into the Coralville Drive-In Theatre, we were flummoxed. We'd seen movies there before. I remember *Blazing Saddles* in the the white station wagon with Mom and Dad. In the morning light, though, it looked like a crop of metal corn planted in a field of gravel, rows and rows of speaker posts, fringed at the bottom with weeds, and festooned with litter from the previous night's showing: candy boxes, popcorn bags, wrappers, cans, bottles, hotdog boats, cigarette wrappers. We looked at each other, then turned to Merle, who opened the door, and looked at us.

"Well, come on!"

We got out and followed Merle, who was limping toward the concession building. He unlocked a side door, pulled out a roll of clear plastic bags and handed one to each of us.

"Now I want you to go out and find every can and bottle you can. Put 'em in your bags, and when they're full, bring 'em back here."

"But why?" I asked.

"Because I said so!" Merle bellowed. "And I'll pay youse. Now get to work."

David looked at me, and I shrugged. We trotted out among the speaker posts and began dropping sticky, sweet smelling soda and beer cans into our bags. After several minutes, I glanced back. Merle was sitting at a picnic table in the shade of the concession stand, smoking a

cigarette. When he saw me looking, he raised a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon and shouted, “Keep up the good work!”

I don’t know how long we were out there, baking in the hot sun as it heated the gravel beneath our feet like the inside of a pizza oven, but we found all the cans and bottles we could. Back at the picnic table, Merle had separated the bottles, which he could return for a deposit, from the cans, which he would smash and sell by the pound. He eyed up our haul, and looked over at us.

“Go ahead and put these bags up on the back of the truck,” he said. “Be careful with them bottles! If you break ‘em, they’re no good.”

We nodded.

“Okay. What kind of pop you want?”

David and I didn’t know what to say.

“It’s a simple question. Pepsi, Coke, what?”

“Coke?” I said.

“Seven-up!” David chimed. Merle went into the concession building while David and I loaded the bags into his pickup. When we were finished, Merle handed us each a can of soda. I was hot and sweaty, and pop was such a rare treat, that the sugary, caramelly Coke tasted about as good as anything I’d ever had before. We rode contentedly back to the Breese home, where David and I helped Merle unload the cans into the garage. Before he got back into the truck, he handed us each two quarters.

“Now put that in your pocket,” he said. Then he drove off to redeem the bottles we’d found for their deposits. Even back then, fifty cents was not a lot of money. But it was more than we had, so we were grateful and excited to tell Dad and, hopefully, convince him to take us to a

store, where we could peruse the candy selection. We helped Merle maybe one or two more times, but strangely it didn't change anything around the house. At the drive-in, he didn't say much, but he was never mean. In the garage, smashing cans, though, he didn't want us around and would always holler if we got too close, shooing us out of his presence.

Despite our general misery and boredom at the Breeses' house, one day while we were supposed to be in Velma's care, David and I experienced a childhood miracle—and mystery—that we are still unable to explain. Velma was either extremely inattentive as a sitter or just didn't care. Whatever the reason may be, one day, David and I simply left. We walked out of the yard and headed down toward the Coralville Strip, U.S. Highway 6, the main business corridor through the Iowa City suburb. That's where one could find most of the town's stores, supermarkets, restaurants, gas stations, hotels, and fast food outlets, and even though there were no sidewalks, you could walk from parking lot to parking lot and not have to worry too much about crossing busy streets.

On that day, I don't remember why we set out for the Strip (maybe we had some change from helping Merle), but we cut down between the Green Pepper, a pizza place that was never as good as Pagliai's, and Mr. Quick, a burger-and-shakes fast food chain, to walk along the highway. Passing between the parking lots, we crossed a narrow gravel strip behind a phone booth, where a piece of metal conduit had been exposed. David jumped from one curb onto the gravel, and then onto the next curb. When he did so, the phone booth emitted a loud jangling noise. We looked at one another and went to investigate. The floor of the booth was covered in dimes, nickels and quarters. The coin return was also full. We couldn't believe it! We rushed to find every coin that had come out the pay phone and stuff our pockets. Excited to figure out what we came up with, we headed for the shade of Mr. Quick to count our loot, and in so doing, I

stepped on the piece of conduit. Again, the phone booth jangled like a slot machine. Giddy with excitement, we ran back and found another boothful of booty. As we started back toward Mr. Quick, something occurred to me.

"Hey David. Wait!"

I walked back toward the piece of exposed conduit, and jumped on it. Sure enough, the phone ejected piles of coins. David and I took turns jumping on the cable until we'd emptied the payphone of its contents. When we'd finished, we had a total of almost twenty dollars in coins weighing down the pockets of our shorts, which we had to hold at the waistbands to prevent them from falling to our ankles—*We were rich!* We marched into Mr. Quick and ordered burgers and fries and shakes. We just sat there for most of the afternoon, enjoying our food, the air conditioning, our amazing good fortune, and we didn't leave until we had to get back to Velma's for Dad to pick us up. David and I went back to that phone booth several more times that summer, but we could never get it to pay out again. At least we were both there to witness it, because nobody seems to believe me when I tell them the story.

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I. On my tenth birthday, in a picnic pavilion at City Park in Iowa City, I received a chess set: the board gold-colored metal arrayed with black squares, embedded in a brown, plastic case that could just as well have been a personal-sized (thin crust) pizza box; intricately-molded magnetic pieces: compact sculptures seemingly carved from dark chocolate and almond bark, begging to be eaten.

II. On his tenth birthday, in a picnic pavilion at City Park in Iowa City, I gave Trent a brown, magnetic chess set, found among the cards, stuffed cats and dogs and chimps in a gift shop at University of Iowa Hospital where I was visiting my younger son, David. Grocery store stop for a square chocolate cake, Star Wars wrapping paper, and then City Park, exhausted, where Trent and four friends played four square before the party. In the picnic pavilion, I stabbed ten rainbow candles into the brown square of the grocery store cake. Harold never came—he was probably off fucking his new wife, Marion.

III. I don't remember what gift I gave to my son for his tenth birthday—a chess set, maybe?—but I did not attend his party in the picnic pavilion at City Park in Iowa City. I had visited David in the hospital but was called by my job at the University of Iowa Steam Shop to go into the tunnels and wrap the huge pipes, flowing with steam, in asbestos casts, like fractured limbs of steel. Candi probably told people I was off fucking my new wife, Marion.

IV. Two days before my brother's tenth birthday, a car hit me on my new, three-speed bicycle from the second-hand shop. So, I could not go to his birthday party in the picnic

pavilion at City Park in Iowa City. Instead, arm casted, forehead cut, eye swollen, I lay abed at University of Iowa Hospital and wished I could be at the park: Not necessarily because it was Trent's birthday, but because I would rather be at City Park than abed in a hospital room. Instead, I scanned a stack of pictures and cards made by my third-grade classmates and sent to the hospital. Janet Kaslavka colored me in the sky with angel wings. I cried and worried that I might be dead. But after the party at the picnic pavilion, Trent and Mom came to my room with a piece of cake, which I ate; then Trent showed me how to play chess.

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One summer night when I was ten, I lay down next to Mom in her bed, because her room had a window that caught the breeze better, making it cooler than the stuffy, airless room David and I shared, where, even if you opened the window, nothing came in but the sounds of chirping frogs from the creek running behind the apartment complex, the distant muted roar of big rigs on the interstate, and voices arguing or cooing or laughing in the Villa Brun parking lot. I think that was one of the months when they'd turned off our power because Mom hadn't paid the bill or taken the bus downtown—we were between phones, so she couldn't call—to the Iowa Electric offices to work out some kind of an arrangement to get our electricity back. The lack of lights was manageable since it didn't get dark until nine or ten at night in the middle of summer; it was the lack of air conditioning that was hard to bear.

Figure 20. The former Villa Brun apartments. The tree that used to be in the center courtyard is gone, and half the courtyard is now parking spaces.

Sometimes during our breaks from air conditioning, we'd take blankets out to the small courtyard and lay them down on top of the grass. There was a single big tree in the yard, maybe an oak or a cottonwood (it's gone now), and the three of us would lie on top of the blankets and look up through its branches toward the night sky. Although it was dulled by the town's amber lights, we could still see stars, which we would wish upon, for electricity, a lottery win, pizza, soda, or a magical check in the mail from Texas.[10]

[10] Mom always expected a magical check to arrive in the mail, and when it did, it would be from Texas. To my knowledge, Mom never found a check from Texas in her mailbox.

But that night, Mom and I lay in her bed. David had managed to fall asleep back in the room he and I shared. She wore a nightgown over her big, soft belly; and, always a little incontinent, she smelled vaguely of piss, sweat, and cigarette smoke—a sour-sweet scent that meant "Mom" to my fifth-grade nose. Soft amber light from the courtyard illumined the edges of the curtains and shadowed the corners of the room. As I was slipping into my dreams, Mom started and shifted suddenly.

"Trent," she said. "There's a spider on my back!"

She'd been terrified of spiders since Mitchellville, where spiders crawled all over her fourteen-year-old, goosepimpled skin. Me, I'm not afraid of spiders—but I also don't seek them out—however, a mother's fear sometimes becomes her child's. Like the times Mom swore she was possessed, and the devil was close at hand—living inside her, trying to devour her soul, coming to get us kids. Those were the times she used a Sharpie to draw a cross on her forehead and wouldn't allow us to open any windows or doors in the tiny, two-bedroom apartment. Once, as a thunderstorm was coming in, the wind whipped open the screen door off the kitchen, and Mom screamed, held up a cross toward the door and shouted the Lord's Prayer over and over. That scared the shit out of me. Even though I was kid, I'd already manifested a pretty secular view of the universe. But what if she was right, and Satan was trying to rip the door off our apartment to consume us in fire and brimstone and eternal damnation? As afraid as I was, I tried to be the voice of reason, assure Mom and David that it was just the wind from the storm, assure Mom that we were all going to be okay (although she never really was "okay"). Whether demons or spiders, after her divorce from Dad, I often assumed the role of the adult in the room. And lying there in the dark, I was pretty sure she was imagining things, again.

"Mom, there's no spider."

“It’s there, it’s there, I can feel it crawling—please check!” The panic was rising in her voice. “Please, Trent!”

It was too dark in the room for me to see, since we had no lights, but even at that age, I knew how Mom could spiral into her own fears, and I could feel myself on the fringe her vortex. The hairs on my neck pricked up.

“I promise there’s no spider, Mom.”

“Are you sure?”

I began to relax.

“I’m sure.”

“Just rub your hand along my back to make sure.”

It’s not that I thought there was actually a big hairy spider on Mom’s back anymore than I believed Beelzebub knew where our apartment was, but, as with the devil, I feared the possibility that I might be wrong.

“It’s okay, there’s no spider.”

“Just put your hand on my back.”

“I can’t.” The fear in her voice was frightening me, and I didn’t want to know whether there was anything on her back. And I didn’t want to be wrong.

“Why not?” I could feel Mom growing even more agitated, but she’d backed me into a corner: The truth spilled out.

“It might bite me.”

Mom leapt out of the bed, tearing off her nightgown in the dark, and completely naked, slapped her bare feet into the bathroom, wailing through her teeth. She whipped back the shower curtain, started the water, and got in. The jets doused her back, and she sighed in relief.

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It's really impossible to describe how just much time I spent at hospitals, clinics, and doctor's offices as a kid (my brother, too, of course), especially after the divorce when we couldn't be left home with Dad because, eventually, he moved far away from Iowa City. A September 1, 2000, clinical report from St. Peter Regional Treatment Center in Minnesota describes Mom as having

> a long psychiatric and medical history, with 78 chart volumes at the University of Iowa with what are believed to be 70 hospitalizations and between 1500 and 2000 medical encounters. She carries psychiatric diagnoses of schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, major depressive disorder with psychotic features, borderline personality disorder, dissociative disorder and somatization disorder. She has been treated with numerous antipsychotics apparently, with little benefit, and tells me that she received thrice weekly ECT for over one year at the University of Iowa.[11]

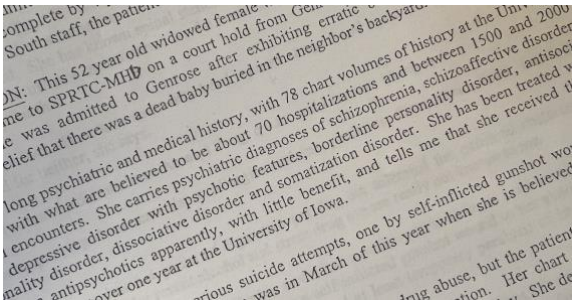
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Figure 21. Psychiatric records, 2000.

Taking only the low estimate into consideration, 1,500 "medical encounters" excluding hospitalizations, Mom's history shows that she visited the University of Iowa hospital, on average, more than once a week for thirty years. This doesn't account for other hospitals, like Mercy Hospital in Iowa City, another favorite of hers, or St. Mary's in Rochester, Minnesota; nor does it account for her weekly, and often more frequent, therapy appointments at the Community Mental Health Center.

Yeah, I spent a lot time at hospitals—mostly in vending or waiting areas, but sometimes actually visiting Mom in her room or, more often, on open psych wards. In 1970s, the psych

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11 The report also notes that Mom had "made at least two serious suicide attempts, one by self-inflicted gunshot wound"—which landed her in Mitchellville and made her a near-lifelong ward of the State of Iowa (we moved her to Minnesota the year before she died, where she managed to be committed twice)—and "another by overdose… in March of [2000]."

ward at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics was tucked away in its own low, brick building, across a curve in Newton Road from the emergency entrance, which David and I were also quite familiar with thanks to Mom's frequent diagnoses of nonexistent maladies—in both herself and in us—confirming imagined symptoms with her well-worn copy of *The Merck Manual* and using information from *The Physicians Desk Reference* to discuss her own recommended treatments with doctors. Mostly, David and I were prescribed loop-handled lollipops as tight-faced but polite doctors and nurses did their best to get Mom to leave so they could treat people with real problems. Not surprisingly, Mom was on a first-name basis with the reception staff in the ER. Across the street, in the psych ward, though, Mom's difficulties did not lay in convincing doctors and nurses of her illness; rather, she spent almost her entire time there trying to convince everyone that she was *perfectly fine!* and should be allowed to go home.

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After a few trout fishing trips to northeast Iowa with friends, Dad and Marion fell in love with the area, its bluffs, rivers, and streams, and in late spring 1979, they moved to Decorah, a small college town on the Upper Iowa River, 125 miles away from Mom. They had bought ten acres of wooded bluffside outside of town, with a decades-old log cabin—Scandinavian style, with squared-off logs and white, concrete chinking—and a barn forever in midcollapse. They began gutting and adding onto the cabin to make it livable. I had just finished fifth grade, and after school, with the sponsorship of a Lutheran minister Mom had befriended, Pastor Biederman, I went to summer camp for the first time.

Dad picked me up in Iowa City and drove me toward Strawberry Point, where I would spent a week at Camp Ewalu—a Lutheran summer camp. I hiked, and stomped through the shallow, narrow Maquoketa River, running fast as it snaked across the camp's wooded acreage; I sat around fires, ate s'mores, and learned religious songs that made me feel uncomfortable (we were not a religious family despite my occasional brushes with Lutheranism); I shot arrows at targets; ate gorp and bug juice; bought a Sierra cup with my name engraved on it; got heat exhaustion, and spent my last night at camp shivering and throwing up in the infirmary.

When Dad came to take me home, we didn't drive to Iowa City. Instead, he turned the car northward, and drove me to Decorah. I don't remember how much say I had in the matter, but I was going to go live with him and Marion, and David was going to stay with Mom in Iowa City. I had never lived apart from David before, and I was worried about my dwindling collection of friends. After leaving Ernest Horn, David and I had attended Coralville Central, where I had to make new friends during fifth grade. And here I was again, only a year later, faced with the prospect of a new town and a new school with no friends.

We lived in a small apartment on Main Street, across from the courthouse. The apartment was on the first floor of a white, two-story stucco house. Marion's law office was in the front of the apartment, with a big picture window and a porch overlooking the courthouse square, kittycorner from the public library. We had to walk through her office and a pair of curtained French doors at the back to get to the apartment. If Marion had a client, I had to wait outside on the porch, or quietly in my room until her meeting was over. The apartment was two rooms, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. One room was my bedroom, one room was Dad's and Marion's. I remember my room—where I spent most of my time, usually reading or maybe drawing—and the porch, and the rest of Decorah. I can barely picture the kitchen or the main room where they slept. Probably because I spent so little time in either of them.

In Decorah, Dad took a job working on a construction crew. They were building a road and a water tower out by Luther College. Marion was trying to get her fledgling law practice off the ground and, it being summer, was kind of stuck with me. She tried to get me to sign up for Little League, since I had played for a little while in Iowa City, but I didn't know anyone and felt like I'd be made fun of for being new, or not playing as well as the kids there, or worse, not get to play because nobody knew who I was, so I refused. Ultimately, we agreed that I'd take a weeklong canoeing day camp. For a week, I walked to the high school in the morning. A group leader had a handful of canoes lined up on the bank of the small pond between the school and the football stadium (I later learned that folks called it the "Biology Pond"), along with paddles, and life jackets. Each morning, I was assigned a different partner. We practiced different paddle strokes, took turns at the bow and stern of the canoe, and eventually learned how to steer and maneuver our vessels up and down the length of the pond. I'd been a passenger in Dad's canoe

but never been allowed to paddle. I felt empowered and developed a love for being on the water that continued into adulthood. But I didn't really make any friends.

After canoeing, I'd walk home and then, usually, went straight to the library, where I'd spend my afternoons in the cool air, walking up and down the stacks, looking for the next book to read. The library became my second home. Mrs. Henning was the librarian, and she was always kind to me. I was on a *Hardy Boys* jag that summer, and whenever I needed another book that the Decorah Library didn't have, Mrs. Henning would get it for me through an interlibrary loan. In the meantime, she would recommend other titles that she thought I might like and help me find them: *Mrs. Pickerel, The Great Brain, Encyclopedia Brown,* even *Nancy Drew*. Sometimes, her daughter Gwen, who was a couple years older than me, would help out behind the checkout desk. She had dark, curly hair and big eyes; she wore brightly colored sweaters and smiled at me. Gwen was the first friendly kid close to my age that I met in Decorah. Of course, I developed a massive crush on her that summer, which caused me to spend even more time at the library, staying there most every day until it closed or Dad got home from work.

On weekends, Dad would get me up in the morning, and we'd go out to "the Place," as they called it. My days were spent following orders, whether helping Dad haul wheelbarrows full of dirt out from the cabin's stone foundation or pulling weeds in the acre of garden he had planted. By the time it started to get dark, I was tired and hungry and couldn't wait until Monday rolled around. But I had to get through Sunday, first. Dad spent every spare hour trying to make the Place livable, and even rain didn't spare me from my weekend labors. Those days, I'd been inside the cabin, picking up loose rocks or pulling nails and throwing old boards out onto a pile that we'd eventually burn or, if they were still solid enough, reuse.

Eventually, school started, and I was sent into the breach of sixth grade, alone and friendless, but ready. I mostly enjoyed school and always looked forward to those first few weeks back in the classroom when the air was still warm on the playground, and there was plenty of daylight left when the final bell rang. The beginning of school did nothing to my weekend routine of working at the Place, but it offered a welcome change to the monotony of my weekdays.

I had grown used to the comparatively-modern, lowlying buildings that housed elementary schools in the Iowa City district. East Side Elementary, with its three floors of stone and brick, along with two towering turrets, intimidated me. The floors were wood waxed to a shine that reflected the faces and shoes of kids of all sizes who were clamoring for their new classrooms, greeting friends they hadn't seen since last year, last month, or last week, shooting occasional questioning glances in my—the new kid's—direction. I trudged up three flights to the sixth-grade hall on the top floor of the building. Finding my classroom, I was smitten by my young, smiling teacher, with shoulder-length dark hair and welcoming dimples. Ms. Kiesler (soon to become, heartbreakingly, Mrs. Kust) looked at the name tag pinned to my shirt and directed me to a desk in the row next to the window. I lifted the gouged wooden top and emptied the contents of my backpack into it. Then I began arranging it neatly, so I could find everything I would need on that first day of class.

Figure 22. The former East Side Elementary School, Decorah, Iowa.

I did well in school, was placed in advanced reading and math classes. When band was offered, I even took up the alto saxophone. I remember the day we brought my rental sax home from Kephart's music, its brass body gleaming against the blue velvet interior of the case. Because most kids started band in fifth grade, I was already a year behind my classmates in band, so I was lumped in with the the younger players. I also had difficulty with the keys and reading the notes from the sheets. Mrs. Sheppard, the band teacher, begged me to practice. But, at home, my playing bothered Marion. Dad instructed me to play "sweet and low, and far, far away." So, I practiced on the porch or on the courthouse lawn, but I didn't have much of an ear for music. I was embarrassed to bleat my atonal attempts at "Mary Had a Little Lamb" in public. Moreover, the two weekly lesson slots I was given directly interfered with reading class, which I loved. Sometimes, I'd be so caught up in class that I'd forget to go. Other times, I just chose not to. Eventually, Mrs. Sheppard suggested I quit.

She probably said as much to Dad and Marion, too, because not long after, they came to me with a proposition: If I gave up the saxophone, and got them out from under the monthly rental payment, they'd let me buy twenty-five dollars-worth of stuff from the Edmund Scientific catalog. It was an offer they I knew I couldn't refuse—it was way too sweet. I *loved* the Edmund Scientific catalog.[12] Within days, my sax was back where it belonged (sweet and low and far, far

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12 Melissa Edgerton, the daughter of Dad and Marion's friends Ann and David, and the only other person I knew whose parents were divorced, had shown me her catalog and the telescope she'd ordered from it once when we were visiting their house. When we got home, I immediately wrote away for my own catalog and received one every month (or maybe quarter) thereafter. Of course, I also had a huge crush on Melissa, who was three years older and attended school in a different district from me. But after only having known her for a few months, she moved back to New England to live with her dad. Apparently, they were going on a backpacking trip when she got there, because she also showed me REI catalog from which she was ordering gear—the first specimen I ever saw of that fine periodical, as well. I don't remember much about Melissa, but she sure had excellent taste in catalogs.

away from me), and within a few weeks, I was the proud owner of a chemistry set, a dissection kit, and an Estes model rocket. Even today, though, if I catch a smell of drying grass along a lakeshore or just the right scent from cut wood, I'm transported immediately back to that front porch Main Street, can feel rough texture of the saxophone reed on my lips and taste the woodiness on my tongue.

I did make friends, eventually. Scott and P.D. were my closest. Lora and Jody were girls in my class who were always funny and nice to me. One of the toughest things for me was explaining that I had parents who were divorced. Almost everybody's parents were together,[13] unless one of them was dead. Lora and Kristi both had dead fathers. Lora's had a heart attack, Kristi's died in a plane crash just before sixth grade started. It was big news in the town. Her dad was a lawyer (Marion had done some side work for his firm) who was returning from a business trip on a small plane that went down somewhere south of Decorah. I remember feeling sad and awkward and, since I didn't really know anybody who knew him, except my stepmother, didn't know what to say to anyone.

But kids didn't know what to do with divorced parents or with a kid who had grown up so far away and in a bigger city. Explaining that the woman I lived with was not my mom, and that I had to go back to Iowa City for holidays, and that I had to take a bus from the Scenic Hawkeye Stages depot to do it was embarrassing. So was telling friends that I couldn't hang out on weekends or stay overnight because I had to help my dad work out at the Place. It got easier, but it didn't help me make friends.

Before the first semester was over, Mom was back in the hospital, and David came to live with us. There had been an extra bed in my room, ready for him in case he ever came to visit, so

13 Except, of course, Melissa Edgerton's parents, *supra.*

we were back together again, and I was glad for the company. As the brother who had already established himself in town, I took to showing David around the school—he was a fourth grader—and the town. And with David, I was more willing to explore further. We'd walk as far as the Luther College campus. Sometimes, on Sunday nights, after we got back from the Place, David and I would walk around town looking for bottles and cans—like we'd learned from Merle Breese, except Iowa had recently instituted a five-cent deposit on cans. Now you could simply return them to a store instead of smashing them and selling them by weight. On Sunday evenings, Decorah was dead. All the downtown stores were closed, if they had opened at all during the day. Most restaurants shut their doors earlier in the evening, and only a few bars, a couple of convenience stores (Kwik Trip, Kum & Go), the bowling alley (Oneota Lanes), and the movie theater (the Viking) would still be open. Sometimes, we might redeem five or six dollars worth of bottles and cans and, splitting the proceeds, go to a movie (35¢),[14] get soda (35¢), and popcorn (30¢), and still have money left. Other times, we'd maybe find enough to buy a candy bar and split it. In addition to the money we'd make scrounging for cans and bottles, Dad and Marion started giving us each a weekly allowance, as well. During the holiday season, though, all the downtown stores stayed open until 9 p.m. most nights and even until 6 p.m. on Sundays. David and I reveled in the new toy sections open set up at the Ben Franklin and Western Auto stores on Water Street, featuring the latest *Star Wars* action figures and vehicles. We even pooled our money to get Dad a fancy, yellow bathrobe for Christmas from J.C. Penny, which he seemed to love, since he began wearing it around the apartment.

14 Even as a kid, I was surprised at how cheap movies were in Decorah. At that time in Iowa City, a kid's ticket to a movie cost a dollar.

Mostly though, whether shopping, searching dumpster to dumpster for treasure, at the movies, or hanging out at the library or the courthouse lawn, the point was for us to be out of the house for as long as possible. It's what we preferred, and it's what Dad and Marion wanted. It all worked well until the following spring when Dad and Marion found a rental house out in the country, closer to the Place.

The Yellow House, as it came to be known in the vernacular my brother and I share, was a long way out of town and in a different school district. For the last month of the school year, we'd ride into town with Marion in the mornings, and then hang out after school, around her office or on the courthouse lawn or at the library, until she was ready to go home.

The Yellow House had a good-sized yard and a pen where Dad kept a pig. He still had his ever-expanding garden at the Place. The feeding of the pig and the weeding and tending of the garden all fell largely onto David's and my shoulders. I can still smell the sour slop bucket—filled with every scrap of leftover food in the house, topped with whey that Dad got especially for the pig—that we had to schlep through knee high weeds to the sty every morning, where the bilious aroma of the slop mixed with the staggering smell of pig shit.

The problem was the house. It consisted of four rooms. One for me, one for David, one for Dad and Marion, and the kitchen. The bathroom was an outhouse. There was jury-rigged plumbing to the kitchen sink and to a small tub next to it. Thankfully, the house did have propane and electricity. So, there was hot water—to the kitchen sink—and a hose that ran from the sink that we could use to fill the tub for baths. When Marion was taking a bath, David and I weren't allowed inside the house. Marion and Dad also kept a five-gallon bucket with a lid in their room that they used if they didn't want to go to the outhouse. David and I were in charge of emptying

that, as well, the smell of a day or two's worth of acrid piss stinging our nostrils as we poured it through the hole in the outhouse.

We, on the other hand, weren't allowed a bucket and had to go outside whenever we needed to go. As boys, peeing was never too much of a problem: just step outside and aim downwind. It was when we need to use the outhouse, especially at night, that things were uncomfortable, or downright scary. There were plenty of snakes, including timber rattlers, living in the valleys and bluffs of the area. Spiders of all kinds seemed to gravitate to the outhouse, as did wasps and hornets, who nested in its corners and eaves. Even so, we got through the summer okay; with plenty of outside space, David and I were mostly on our own when Dad and Marion were at work, and we spent weekends working at the Place.

It was when school started that the Yellow House became intolerable. We were in the Waukon district, so that meant switching schools again. And the tension between David and Marion had started anew when he moved in with us. They heated up as the weather got colder, and we were all forced to spend more and more time inside. After a semester of junior high (fifth grade for David) in Waukon, we went to Mom's for winter break and refused to go back.

I started the spring semester of my seventh grade year at Northwest Junior High, living with Mom at the Villa Brun apartments in Coralville. David was back at Coralville Central. I renewed some friendships from elementary school and was really excited about the electives available at Northwest. Seventh grade was derailed for me, though, in early May. Playing basketball during gym class, I dislocated my first and second cervical vertebrae, spent a week in the hospital with my neck in traction, on a Thompson frame, which meant I had to be turned like a rotisserie chicken every few hours. I spent the rest of the summer in a brace supporting my chin and neck.

By the time I started eighth grade, Mom had moved us out of town—but still in the Iowa City district—to a tiny crossroads community called Sharon Center. Instead of an apartment, we lived in a house. I think it was a converted garage, but it was a house nonetheless. I had my own room, and my room even had its own door to the outside.

Figure 23. Mom's former house in Sharon Center, Iowa.

Meanwhile, David had moved back in with Dad and Marion. The Place, soon to be called the Red House, was livable, and David could once again attend school in Decorah. By winter break, though, he was in Sharon Center with me and Mom… and Mom's new boyfriend, Louie, who was even older than Dad. Although I was still bussing to Northwest, David had to attend a different elementary school in the district, in the small town of Hills.

Louie was a drinker and also had a nasty chewing tobacco habit. After a couple months, Mom threw him out of the house. He moved into an apartment in Iowa City. Then Mom went into the hospital. She asked Louie if we could stay with him for a while, and David and I moved into his place at the Mark IV Apartments. By May, David had stopped going to school altogether, and when Dad got wind of it, he arranged for me to take the rest of my schoolwork with me, and moved us both back to Decorah, where we stayed for most of the summer. I went back to live with Mom after she was out, but by winter break of my ninth grade year, she was back in the hospital, and I moved back to Dad's.

At school, I picked up with some old friends and even made some new ones pretty quickly. I liked my classes. The Red House was bigger and more spacious than any other place

we'd lived. John and I had our own large room on the upper floor. There was electricity. But we heated and cooked with wood. One day each weekend was spent helping Dad cut wood. And there was no running water. We had to pump our water by hand from a well and carry it into the house in five gallon buckets for drinking, washing, and bathing. On bath nights, we all shared the same water. Marion first. Then Dad, me, and, finally, David. I went to school always smelling of woodsmoke, but, to some extent, I finally felt like I'd found a home.

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There was no school on Good Friday in 1984—nor the following Monday—due, I assume, to the Easter holiday in between. We weren't a particularly religious family, so it was just a day off for David and me. But days off weren't always all that fun.

As a tenth-grader, I would much rather have spent the day with my friends than with David, who's a couple years younger. But the Red House was on a rural acreage, fourteen miles outside of Decorah, and all my friends lived in town. Dad and Marion had already left for work, so we were stuck out there in the country. Terminally bored.

"Stop looking at me!"

"Fuck you," I said. "I can look at anything I want."

David left the room.

Around noon, we heard tires crunching the gravel of our long driveway. David and I made our way from our separate corners of the house to the living room, where the windows revealed Dad's tan Ford Ranger coming round the weathered old barn.

When Dad walked in the door, he was out of breath. He was a smoker, so coughing and wheezing were not unusual, but this was different. I'd never known him to leave work early. He moved quickly, retrieving his .22 caliber rifle from the utility room behind the kitchen.

"Dad, what's going on?" I asked.

He picked up a yellow, plastic box, opened it to make sure there were cartridges inside. Satisfied, he closed the top and slipped it into the pocket of his plaid, wool jacket.

I'm going to go help Earl take care of a rattler that got into his shed.

Neither David nor I had ever actually seen a rattlesnake, though we knew they were around, making their dens in the limestone bluffs of the region. This seemed like a sure-fire antidote for the slow-moving venom of a boring day.

"Can we come?"

"Not this time," Dad said.

The screendoor slammed behind him as he walked to his pickup, threw the cased rifle across to the passenger seat, and closed the door. He backed into the turnaround and drove more quickly than usual up the driveway and out onto the gravel road, leaving a pall of white dust to settle over the trees and lawn.

A shroud of ennui settled over the afternoon. David and I bickered, ignored, and annoyed each other. We were in separate rooms when we, again, heard tires on the driveway. Dad had been gone for hours, and Marion was not home yet. No calls, nothing. At that age, parents not being home didn't bother me like it did when I was little—but I didn't like being trapped out there with nothing to do.

In the living room, we saw a car that belonged neither to our father nor our stepmother coming down the lane. Because it was out of place, it took a moment for me to realize that it was Sandy Baldridge's car. Her sons, Joe and Jim, were friends of ours. David and I exchanged glances and went outside to meet her.

Sandy was alone. When she got out of the car, Sandy did not smile. She looked worried. I began to feel uneasy, myself.

"Hi Sandy?"

"Why don't you boys grab some clothes? You're going to come stay with us for the weekend."

Confused, we hesitated.

"Why?" I asked.

"Just get your things, I'll tell you in the car."

David and I slowly walked back into the house, united over our mutual worry, trying to guess at what was happening.

"Do you think dad got bit?" David asked.

"Maybe. I don't know."

Backpacks full, David and I made our way to the car, arguing over who had to sit in the front with Sandy. I lost because I was the oldest, so I got into the passenger seat, put my bag on the floor between my legs. And waited.

We rode in silence for several minutes.

"Did you boys listen to the radio at all today?"

We shook our heads.

"Did your dad or Marion call the house?"

"Dad came home around noon," I said. "But he left again."

Sandy nodded and swallowed.

"Boys…"

There was something about her voice that I didn't like—not that I liked anything that was going on, but I could tell she didn't want to tell us what was happening.

"I got a call from Marion. Everyone's okay, but…"

"Did a rattlesnake bite Dad?" David asked from the backseat, a worried look on his face.

"No, honey, nothing like that. Your dad's okay, but he's in jail."

"Jail?! Why? What for?" I thought maybe he'd been caught hunting out of season. He'd done it before, and he did take his gun with him.

"Marion called me. Your dad tried to shoot her." Shards of thoughts fractured against my skull, and the old emptiness was back in my stomach. Were we going to have to go live with Mom?

What would happen to Dad? What would they say at school? The twenty-minute trip into town was swathed in silence, I could feel my palms sweating against the straps of my backpack. The ride lasted forever.

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They initially charged Dad with attempted murder. He'd fired his rifle over the heads of Marion and a local stonemason, with whom she'd been having an affair. On Easter Sunday, Marion came to see us at Sandy's, explained to us that we couldn't stay with her anymore, and that we'd be able to come get some of our stuff soon. I was a fifteen-year old sophomore, my Dad had just been arrested, and all I could think of was what other kids at school were going to say. I was terrified of going back to school. But when I finally did, almost nobody said anything to me. A redneck or two even approached me to say Dad had done the right thing, and he should have aimed better. Waves of relief washed over me.

We stayed in Decorah with Sandy and her family for the rest of the school year. Dad was released on bail, but due to a protective order Marion had petitioned for, was not allowed into Winneshiek County. By this time, Dad was working for a kosher and halal meatpacking plant in Postville, AgriProcessors, maintaining its boilers. Since Postville was in the next county over from Decorah, he found an apartment there, on Main Street above a furniture store. David and I spent weekends with him. After school was out for the year, we moved in with Dad. Over the summer, he entered into an arrangement with prosecutors and pleaded guilty to terroristic threats. He was sentenced to three years on probation and required to stay away from Marion and the stonemason. But he was allowed to move more freely once again.

After that summer in Postville, Dad, David, and I moved into a tiny apartment on River Street in Decorah, and Dad started seeing Rosa. Or, I guess I should say, he got back together with her. He had been fucking her back when he and Marion were still married. Rosa was also an MFA (poetry, again) from Iowa, so I guess he probably met her through that circle that he and Marion had been hanging out with in Iowa City. David and I had first met her when Marion was away at a Breadloaf Conference, and Dad introduced us to her, without further explanation (but,

by then, we knew what he meant), as his "friend." Another time, when Marion was in town, and we lived in the Yellow House outside Waukon, David and I saw Rosa standing on the bluff above the house making gestures toward the sky. Her car was parked down the gravel road from our house. We could see it from the end of the driveway. David ran back inside to tell Dad about the strange woman on the bluff and the car parked alongside the road. He said to "Never mind" and just go to school.

Anyway, we were living in that basement apartment in Decorah, in a brick house just across River Street from the Porter House Museum, an old manse whose brick exterior was surrounded by a stone wall made from fossils, geodes, and other unusual rocks. The door to our apartment opened into the kitchen. John and I shared a space that doubled as the living room, off to the left. If you walked straight ahead, you'd walk into Dad's room, and if you kept going, you'd get to the apartment's only bathroom. That made things pretty awkward when Dad moved Rosa and her stepdaughter Emily, who was only three or four, into the apartment with us. Going to the bathroom had already been a pain before they moved into Dad's room, too.

This was at the beginning of my junior year, and shortly after school started, on my sixteenth birthday, I finally got my driver's license. I also got a job working as a dishwasher and busboy at Café Deluxe, which was just a few blocks from the apartment, on weekend mornings and one morning before school. I dreaded every morning of getting up and dragging my feet into work before there were any customers—and long before it was light out—to help bring eggs and slabs of bacon and heavy rounds of cheese and mesh bags of onions up from the basement storage room to the cramped kitchen for prepping. What I didn't dread was a paycheck during the school year or the free meal at the end of my shift. Before school, I would usually order an omelet, stuffed with cheese, peppers, onions, bacon, tomatoes, and mushrooms, along with a

couple toasted slabs of the café's homemade bread. On weekends, I usually got a tuna melt on the same bread, with the hand-cut French fries. Those days, even though I was the lowliest employee in the restaurant, I ate just as well as any paying customer, and I went home or to school happy. Sometimes, I'd ask for something extra to take home to David, and Dean, the owner, would usually oblige.

It was strange working at Café Deluxe. We'd been among its first customers when it opened in 1979. Dad and I went in for breakfast just after we'd moved to town. With Dad and Marion, I'd eaten there often enough that the workers recognized me as Dad's son—everybody always seemed to know my father, for better or worse. Once I started working there, though, they treated my like an adult and recognized me as me, and not just as "Jonas's kid." Also contributing to the weirdness was the fact that the restaurant was only a block away from Marion's office. On the days that I worked there, I always worried that she would come in, and I didn't know what I would do. She never did though. In fact, I think I only ever saw her one more time, and on that occasion, I felt like I was being treated too much like an adult.

When we were living in the River Street apartment, I was fifteen or sixteen. Although it was only a few months after the shooting incident, Dad and Marion were finalizing their divorce, and he asked me to come with him to the courthouse. He had a lawyer, but he wanted me there, too. I sat outside in the hall, on a polished wooden bench, like a church pew, in the cool dimness of the marbled courthouse while Dad and the lawyers were in the courtroom trying to work working out a settlement. Doors and voices and footsteps echoed through the building, but they were hushed, muffled, as quiet as a church. I was nervous and didn't know why I was there. The last time Dad had been there was to enter his guilty plea for shooting a couple months earlier. With the probationary sentence, he felt vindicated.

"If I had wanted to hit 'em, I woulda," he said to just about anyone who asked and (it seemed to me) most people who didn't. Looking back on the whole thing, it's incredible to me how quickly the legal processes moved. In less than six months, he had pleaded guilty, received probation, was allowed back into Winneshiek County (which meant we didn't have to change schools again), and managed to finalize his divorce. At the time, though, everything seemed to drag on forever, especially sitting in the hallway of the courthouse waiting for whatever was going to happen to happen. Eventually, Dad came out.

"Son, I need you to tell me what you think I should do." He explained the details of what Marion and her attorney had offered in terms of a property settlement, and then he waited for me to answer. Marion earned more than Dad, and Dad had built their home—the Red House—with his own hands, so he had considerable sweat equity in the property. He legitimately appeared to want advice from a sixteen-year-old while his very competent lawyer waited for him in the courtroom. While I realized, even then, that it was supposed to be a compliment—that he trusted in me that much—I felt very uncomfortable being saddled with such an adult decision.

"I'll do whichever one you think is best," he said and continued to wait. Finally, I told him which one sounded better to me (annual payments over a period of years) and why (a greater total amount), and he accepted my opinion unquestioningly. He went back into the courtroom, and came out a few minutes later with his lawyer, and we went home. Almost forty years later, I can still feel my unease at being asked to make such a decision at that age. What did I know? What experience had I had? Why did I have to be the adult in the room for him, *too*?

The following spring, 1985, we—Dad, Rosa, Emily, David, and I—moved out to a rental in the country (the Green House). David and I each had our own rooms (although mine didn't have a door, I hung a sheet across the entrance, and it was still all my own), as did Emily. The

house was old, but it was two stories, and had plenty of room for us all. My bedroom was on the main floor. It was probably supposed to have been a den or a parlor or something, as it was off the living room. And the nearest bathroom was just through the kitchen. I didn't have to walk through anybody else's bedroom, or out to an outhouse, to get there.

With access to Dad's car, a light-blue Ford Fiesta (Rosa had a little Chevy pickup that they could use), my social life improved during my junior year. I started to date. I held hands a little with a Colombian foreign exchange student named Wilma Botero (we watched *Young Frankenstein* at her host family's house), but ultimately, she liked someone else. I became involved in speech and drama, and I began playing tennis. As busy as I was, and with the fifteen miles of gravel roads separating me from Café Deluxe, I also quit my job, which gave me more time to spend with friends and on extracurricular activities.

That spring, I went out a couple times with a girl named Lauren. She was in speech, too, and the daughter of a doctor in town. I asked her to prom, and she said yes. At the same time, I had auditioned for, and got, a few small (nonsinging) parts in a community theater production of *The Music Man.* I figured that, instead of renting a tux, I would just raid the New Minowa Players' costume closet. So, on prom night, I picked up Lauren wearing a white dinner jacket, black pants, a ruffled tux shirt, and a black tie and cummerbund. I looked more like I was on my way to emcee an amateur variety show in the 1940s than like I was taking a date to pre-prom dinner. Nevertheless, Lauren was a sport, dinner was fun—we road tripped to LaCrosse, Wisconsin for dinner at a fancy place called Michaels Cerise. I ate duck a l'orange (haven't had

it since), and then we made the fifty-mile trip back to the dance. Once there, Lauren and I went our separate ways, but I still managed to have fun. Because of Lora. (I know, the names are too similar, but hey, that's life).

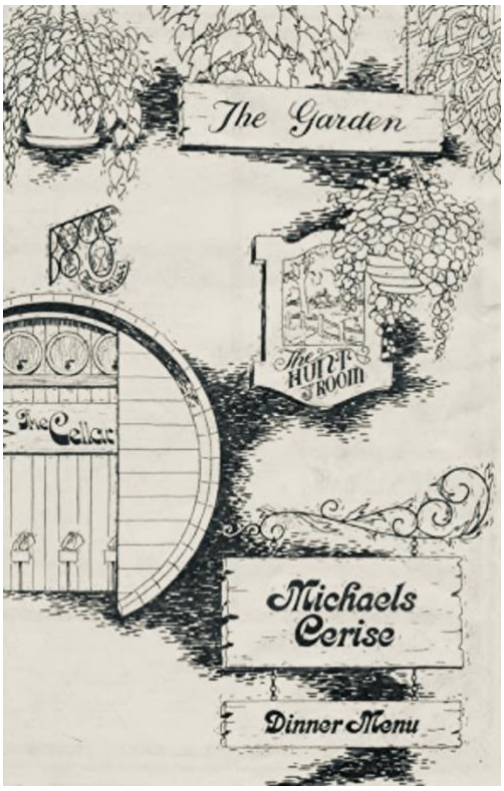

Figure 24. Menu from Michaels Cerise, LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

Lora was in my sixth-grade class at East Side Elementary. She had moved away some time after I did and so wasn't in school when I moved back with Dad during ninth grade. She showed up at Decorah High School during the spring of my junior year, and we became friends. Lora played tennis, she was involved in speech, and had a bigger role (she could sing) in *The Music Man.* We joked with each other at rehearsals and would go out with friends afterward for nachos at Taco Bill's or pizza at Mabe's. She had borrowed a dress from the New Minowa Players and had come to prom. I don't remember if she had a date or not, but I know that I spent most of my night talking and dancing with her, and then hanging out together at the school-sanctioned casino-themed after party. I'm pretty sure I gave Lauren a ride home when she was ready to go, but it was Lora who was on my mind when I passed out in my bed in the wee hours of the following morning.

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In 1985, the trees surrounding the three-story cascade at Dunning's Spring Park were green as the high school's football field. Winters, you could see from the falls all the way downstream to the Upper Iowa River—and across the levee to the roof of Decorah Senior High. But on that August morning before our senior year, cicadas clicking, cardinals tootling their songs, bumblebees humming over the yellow and orange jewelweed blossoms, all you could see were brambles, bushes and trees. Raspberries, past their prime on the briars, lent a sweet overtone to the earthy smell of the wet streambanks. The trees trudged up the park's ravine, leaning higher, angling to climb around the bare, limestone bluff from which Dunning's Spring sprung. Oak, maple, basswood, cottonwood: The treetops left a blue easter egg of sky above the clearing next to the falls.

Lora and I swung open the doors on my stepmom's yellow Chevy Luv pickup, which was the only car in the gravel lot. We walked across the arched, stone footbridge, just below the falls, and began to climb the trail along the left side of the chute. The trees were close, the still air thick under the weight of the sun. Every now and then, a finger of cool spray reached us from the falls, invigorating our hike. The misted mud of the narrow, tree-rooted trail muffled our footfalls.

Off a spur from the main path, in a thick stand of trees above the falls—which we could hear, but not see—we found a gray, weatherworn picnic table in a little lea. Lora leaned back, planting her ass against one end of table. I put my hands on her hips, over her faded denim cutoffs, and pressed in. "Did you get them?" she asked. I pulled an orange, foil square from my pocket. Even through the wrapper, I caught the hospital-glove smell. We smiled.

Eventually, Lora and I both chose colleges in Minneapolis. I opted for the cosmopolitan University of Minnesota, with its sprawling urban campus and enrollment of fifty thousand students. It also happened to be just across the Mississippi River from Augsburg, the small liberal arts school she attended. I only had to cross the Washington Avenue pedestrian bridge over the river and skirt the edge of downtown Minneapolis to get to her dorm.

Hiking through the high-rise steel and glass canyons of Minneapolis felt foreign, the wind blowing hard between the buildings. Papers kicked up and floated down on the diesel exhaust of whining Metro Transit buses, cheerful ads promoting chastity and cheeseburgers plastered on their sides. Street people asked for "a dollar"—it was always "a dollar"—making me out for the rube I was. When I occasionally said "hello" to folks I passed, like you do in Decorah, they locked their eyes straight ahead and walked faster.

While our campuses looked close on paper, the urban no-man's land that separated us opened a chasm between Lora and me, one that widened as I became more comfortable at the U and in the adjacent neighborhood of Dinkytown, the hub of its East Bank campus. I started out in a dorm, but I eventually moved into an off-campus apartment in Dinkytown, where the lightpoles advertised all that was to be had there. They were layered with handbills for readings, concerts, clubs, jobs, even religions: polychromatic, urban tree trunks. Spiky-haired punks, with spiked ears, spiked noses, and spiked leather jackets, which failed to contain days' worth of showerless, slamdance funk, loitered on the corner of Fourteenth and Fourth in front of Camdi, the Vietnamese place with three-dollar lunch specials. Gray's Campus Drugs, in the hundred-year-old brick building; the single-storied, single-countered, subway tunnel of Al's Breakfast (above which Dylan legendarily lived); the Book House, whose tiny storefront opened, Tardis-like, into three stories crammed with used books; bars, a bike shop, and Giocco. It was a small town in the middle

of the city. My new home: a home with more single women in a single place than I'd ever imagined back in Iowa.

In 1987, Giocco was open twenty-four hours a day. I would go in the middle of the night to drink dark, bitter espresso from stemmed-and-handled glasses and be with other night people, who were sleepless, studying, escaping, or simply needed a warm place to get through the dark hours. I'd write or draw in my journal, wanting to be the next Kerouac; some nights, a singer would be on the stage, bongoing and guitaring like a new Joni Mitchell, and I would watch, lost in the rhythms, ears abuzz with the music and the murmuring and the hisses of steam from the espresso machine, the aroma of coffee filling the spaces and connecting all of us in the café with one another.

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Dad always wore this hideous, yellow, terry cloth bathrobe, and he never tied it tight enough. Whenever he walked around the house in it, which was often, especially after he showered at night, or sitting on a kitchen chair with his legs spread too wide, he treated us to unwanted flashes of his dick and balls. My high school friends used to joke about it. I just tried not to think about it.

But when Rosa called to tell me that Dad had been arrested for molesting Emily, that fucking robe was all I could think about. Her sitting on his lap with him in that robe. I hadn't lived in the household for a couple years—and I'd never lived in that house on Lundy Bridge Road (they moved in after I went to college) so I had to imagine the dynamic. And I simply didn't want to. Dad had admitted what he'd done to Rosa, who demanded that he seek counseling. He agreed, knowing that the counselor was a mandatory reporter, and he'd be turned in. What Dad said, what the friends he managed to keep said, even what Rosa said, and what I said, because I was desperately struggling for a thread to hold onto in order to keep my image of my father alive in my mind, was that he was a simple Appalachian man, and just didn't know better. Just like Marion had it coming and, if he'd really wanted to put a bullet in her, he would have. Just like he really cared about me and David and didn't immediately replace us in his esteem the second he found the next woman he could fuck.

I was Dad's number one apologist.

∞

It’s 1989, the year Dad went to prison. Six days into a nasty December cold snap, constant below-zero temperatures and short, gray days bookended by interminable Minnesota nights, the heat gives out in my Dinkytown apartment. It’s winter break, so I don't have to walk to campus in this weather. But I also can’t stand to be in my apartment.

That first heatless morning, (“We’re working on it,” says the landlord) there’s a layer of ice on the surface of the water in the glass next to my futon. Sitting up in my sleeping bag, itself buried under three blankets, I see my breath when I yawn. I grit my teeth, rush to the bathroom, and bounce my knees, waiting for the shower to heat up, then step in.

I dress quickly, use the blow dryer on my hair and blow it inside my sweater to fend off the inevitable chill for a while longer, grab my backpack, and go. I stop to lean against the functioning radiator in the building’s tiny vestibule. When I finally open the door, the cold punches me in the face, vacuums the air from my lungs.

It’s ten past six in the morning, and the sky has never seemed blacker. The walk is fucking freezing. It’s all of four blocks and ten minutes, but the breeze razors through all of my layers. With each breath, my nostrils freeze together, and I can’t feel my toes in my shoes. Pushing in the outer door to Al’s, I have to wait for it to close before I can pull open the inner door and step inside.

“Shut the damn door!” Grinna hollers. I pull it closed. I’ve never been to Al’s Breakfast when Grinna isn’t manning the grill, barking at servers, customers, and the egg cook in the back, “Two up on an oval!” or “Three easy on a round!”

The place is not much wider than the cab of Dad’s old pickup. I walk the narrow space along the length of the counter and select one of the dozen or so stools. On the other side, the server pours coffee, brings food, smiling and murmuring to the seated patrons, as she moves

from the grill to the back kitchen. A working area along the wall is lined with plates, cups, coffee pots, condiments, and taped-up, yellowed bills of currency, many of which are unfamiliar. Strands of white holiday lights adorn the wall above the countertop.

There are only two other customers. Everyone in the place looks tired. I hang my coat and backpack on a hook behind a stool. When there's a wait, and there often is, this row of head-level coat hooks can be lethal to folks standing behind the stools waiting for a spot to open up. The aroma of coffee and bacon, eggs and pancakes, the heat coming off the grill, are warm and welcoming; my cheeks flush, and I'm sleepy again—but not cold.

"Coffee?" It's the pretty server with the big eyes and long, brown hair, pulled back into a tight ponytail, today. The way she and Grinna flirt, I wonder if they're a couple.

"Please." The coffee at Al's is watery, but it's hot. I wrap my hands around the mug, hold my face over the cup and breathe in the steam's delicious humidity. I take out my journal, straddle the stool, and order. The server writes it down, walks to the grill, and clips it to a board at Grinna's eye level.

"Two scrambled on an oval, Swiss and tom, rye!" Grinna makes the hash browns and bacon himself, so he doesn't call them out.

I try and think where to spend the day (probably Giocco, which is right next door). I wonder if Janet will let me spend the night at her place. She's been saying it's too soon, but maybe with the heat situation, she'll take some pity on me. Then I try and write a story about waking up with a layer of ice on my water and walking to Al's so I didn't have to stay in my apartment.

The server tops off my coffee and slides my breakfast onto the counter. I close the journal to make room and pick up a strip of hot, crisp bacon.

"Need anything else right away?"

"Hot sauce, please." Crunching the bacon, I savor its smoky, greasy perfection.

∞

During my last three years of college, Dad was in prison, first in North Liberty, then in Mount Pleasant—coincidentally, the location of the Iowa state hospital where Mom had been committed at least twice in my memory, and where we had visited her. I guess the adjacent prison was put there so inmates like Dad (*i.e.*, sex offenders) could be treated as well as punished.

For much of Dad's incarceration, I didn't have a car, but I managed to visit him a few times. I'd bus down to Iowa City—an overnight excursion, with several sleep-interrupting stops along the way—and then borrow Mom's car (if she had one at the time) to drive out to the prison and visit him. At least once, my girlfriend drove me as far as Mom's and gamely waited with her and Louie while I drove her car to visit Dad. The towns and river crossings along old Highway 218, between Iowa City and Mount Pleasant, fired childhood memories that hadn't sparked in my mind for well over a decade. I remembered getting snacks and toys (those little plastic army guys with the trash-bag-plastic parachutes that always tangle and never work quite right) from the canteen at the state hospital, and walking around the manicured—by prison inmates, I now realized—grounds with Dad, Mom, and David.

Visits with Dad were not at all the same. We had to sit at a table in a loud, crowded, smoky room. On visiting days, the room was always packed, so it felt like we were shoulder to shoulder with other inmates and visitors. There were vending machines, so I could buy Dad a cup of coffee or a candy bar, and although we'd talk about many things—how he was getting by; what he did with his days; how my school was going; who I was seeing—the conversations always seemed to be dominated by him asking me to send more of everything: money, books, letters; accept more collect calls from him. I was a barely-employed college student, so finding an extra ten or twenty dollars to send to Dad was hard. I did it as often as I could, but I felt guilty that I couldn't do more. And I resented David, who wasn't going to school, for doing nothing. In

fact, after Dad had transferred from North Liberty to Mount Pleasant, I don't think David went to visit him even once.

After Dad had been in for a couple of years, he told me that Rosa was trying to sell her old Ford Fiesta (a different car from the one Dad had when I was in high school) and encouraged me to buy it to help her out—she needed the cash for a down payment on a more reliable car. I paid three, maybe four, hundred dollars for it. This allowed me to drive down and visit Dad more often. It also gave me considerably more freedom at home. Toward the end of college, I was able to take a job in the suburbs that I wouldn't have been able to accept if I had to rely on public transportation. I also bought a cheap tent at Target and began to explore Minnesota, something I hadn't really had a chance to do since moving to Minneapolis. Reconnecting with trees, water, stars, and silence felt like it was just what I needed.

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Dad died in 2002. Prostate cancer. Mom had died the year before, at the Mayo Clinic, of a pulmonary embolism. He was seventy-thee; she was fifty-three. Funny thing is, Mom showed up at the hospital claiming that she had blood clots. But, in light of her history, I don't think they paid much attention to what she was saying. They admitted her for observation. David and I drove down to see her, and wouldn't you know it, after we left, she died of a blood clot that had traveled to her lung.

Mom had asked that we stop by her apartment on the way home and straighten it up a bit, so she'd have a clean place to come home to after the hospital—she said she hadn't had the time or energy to do any cleaning before she checked herself in. So we did. Then we grabbed some coffee and began the 90-minute drive back to the Twin Cities from Rochester.

We were riding quietly in the dark when my cell phone rang, an unknown number with a "507" area code. I picked it up, and when the doctor explained that despite their heroic efforts and attempts to resuscitate Mom, she had died. He asked what we'd like done with the body. I didn't know what to say.

"I don't know. I've never done this before. I don't know what to do." I was numb and couldn't think. David was choking back tears as he dialed his ex-wife, who'd been close to Mom.

"We have a grief counselor here waiting to help you. When can you be here?"

"Less than an hour, I guess." After I hung up, I took a deep breath. David was still on the phone, so I dialed Anne, turned the car around, and headed back toward Rochester. There was still some tension between David and me. Our adult paths had diverged. We had fought over everything from money to what we should do about Mom, whether she needed more assistance, and who was going to pay for it.

Years earlier, our resentment toward one another—and probably toward our parents—had boiled over. I don't even remember what it was about exactly, but it happened a few days after Dad was released from prison. It was the summer before I started law school, 1992. Since I was going back to school, I didn't need Rosa's old Fiesta for commuting to work anymore (I had already quit that job in the suburbs). I offered it to Dad so he could use it to get to work at AgriProcessors, his former employer, which had offered him a job when he got out. After I dropped off the car with Dad in Decorah, David was going to drive me back to Minneapolis. He had come down before me and brought Dad from the motel where he was living in Postville over to Decorah. We met, for some now-forgotten reason, in the parking lot at K&S Super Valu. Almost immediately, David and I started bickering. I don't know if it was the two-and-a-half hour drive that I had just completed, three years of pent up anger at Dad, or just stupidity, but I threw a punch. David hit me back, pushing my glasses into my face and opening a cut in my eyebrow. Bleeding down my face, I went to tackle him. Meanwhile, Dad was begging, practically groveling.

"Please, boys, please stop! I'm on parole, they could send me back to jail. Please!" He was trying to get us to stop and distance himself at the same time. Neither David nor I are really fighters, so it didn't take much to end the physical manifestation of our fight; but we both hold grudges like a mother holds a baby: closely, coddling, protecting, and nurturing, until its ready to be unleashed back into the world. Since David and I would have to sit in a car with each other for the next two-and-a-half hours, I proposed that we get a drink. Dad protested that he couldn't go into bars, so we ended up at T-Bock's. It was enough of a restaurant to ease Dad's fears, but John and I could still get beers. Which we did. And then we managed to get back to Minneapolis without killing each other. I remember the fight and I remember the setting, but I don't

remember the reason. Yet, I know it colored the next decade of my relationship with David. Not three months later, Dad sold the car that I'd given him and financed a new car for himself. Dad had a new car, I had no car, and I was barely speaking to my brother.

Although things had improved by the time Mom died, my relationship with David was far from a close one. When we arrived at the hospital, a nurse led us into Mom's room, where she was still lying on a gurney with a ventilator tube protruding from her gaping mouth. Her eyes were closed, and her skin was cold. It was the first time I had ever seen a *corpse* corpse—one that hadn't been prepped and dressed for a funeral. After I'd seen enough and said goodbye, I walked out of the room and waited for David. He eventually came out, looking paler than we fair-skinned brothers usually do. They put us in a room with a small table. A woman with a professionally somber demeanor walked in and introduced herself as a grief counselor. After handing us each a brochure on the five stages of grieving, she asked what we planned to do with the body. By this time, it was after 10 p.m.

"Can't she just stay here until we figure it out tomorrow or something?" I asked.

"I'm afraid not, you'll have to make arrangements before you go." While we were speaking to this woman, who was doing little to help us deal with grief, Anne and Marissa, David's ex, arrived. When we asked for some time so the four of us could speak, the counselor picked up her clipboard and left.

I was thirty-three-years-old. I had a wife, a son, and a daughter two months from being born. I had a law degree and a thriving real estate services business. I was smart and organized, and, from all appearances, had my shit together. That night, though, I had no idea what to do. I couldn't even think what the first step would be. Ultimately, we decided that Mom should be buried in Tipton, where her father and grandfather were buried. Marissa said she would call

about a burial plot. David said he would take care of everything else, including calling a funeral home and arranging transportation for Mom back to Tipton. All I had to do was pay for it all. And that was about all I was capable of.

Ten months later, when his cancer came back and would not be vanquished, we repeated the process, transported Dad from Minneapolis, where he'd died in a hospital, to Decorah, where he was buried in a cemetery on a hill in the country, from which you can see the last home he ever owned. After almost a year of managing little else but my parents' dying and after spending much of my life, as David had, managing their living, I was exhausted. And relieved.

Figure 25. Mom's headstone, Tipton, Iowa.

Figure 26. Dad's headstone, Decorah, Iowa.

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When I go back to visit Dad's grave, I hear the dipping and rising of the mourner's Kaddish, as it was recited by one of the rabbis who blessed meat at AgriProcessors. Between the fact that I'd converted so I could marry Anne, who's Jewish, in a synagogue, and the Orthodox Jewish community that had popped up in Postville to support AgriProcessors (a story in itself), Dad had been Jewish-curious and befriended several of the rabbis he worked with. So, I asked one to come bless the slab of meat laid out in the casket at Canoe Ridge cemetery that October morning. I remember mumbling along, staring into the rectangular hole, and I think about that first time he ever brought us to Decorah. It was a few months, maybe a year, before he and Marion moved there: 1977, '78?

The two-and-a-half hour car ride from Iowa City felt endless. David and I in the backseat of the old tan Fiat, trying to find anything to stave off boredom: reading until I was motion sick; playing "I spy" until I couldn't take it anymore; poking David until he yelled and Dad bellowed; then just staring out the window. It was spring, and the fields were black, freshly plowed, symmetric rows of dirt, extending to the horizons. As we drove farther north, the horizon drew closer, and the rows began to curve, giving way to trees and limestone outcroppings as we entered Iowa's "driftless area"—the corner of the state untouched by glaciers—and the landscape arrested my attention.

"Reminds me of the foothills back in North Carolina," Dad said to Marion. She nodded and squinted out through her Coke-bottle-thick glasses. Following the turn of her head, I saw the landscape blur through her lenses. Dick Stoner had brought Dad to the area on a trout fishing trip, and now we were all heading up for a weekend of camping and fishing—and to scout acreages, I suspect.

My ride south from Minneapolis to visit Dad's grave echoed those rides north from Iowa City: farm fields, small towns, and gradually changing landscapes, as the wrinkles across the terrain grown deeper and closer together. I drive to that little cemetery, above a valley and across the road from the white, clapboard box of Canoe Ridge Church, and walk across the groomed lawn toward the tallest marker, an upright, black marble slab. The birthdate, the deathdate, and "Not too bad for an Old Geezer" inscribed into the stone, which rises like a middle finger, my fuckyou to everyone else dead or alive, the ghosts who haunted my father, who still haunts me.

A Holstein mooed and snuffed in the pasture beyond the fence and the arborvitae windbreak. After fifteen minutes, I head back to the car and drive across the dust-erupting gravel roads to Highlandville, where the old Peterson's Store had long ago closed, to a brown sign with yellow-painted lettering read "South Bear Creek Access." I grabbed a small cooler out of my trunk. At a picnic table, I drop some ice into a glass, broke the seal on a bottle of Bulleit, then let the amber liquid settle down and round the shoulders off the cubes.

My fingers wrapped around the sweaty lowball of bourbon, hand shaking—just a little bit, but it definitely shook—as I raised the glass to my lips. The bottom of the glass left a dark ring on the faded wood of the picnic table, about the same size as the fly reel Dad had given me on my first Father's Day, after Henry was born. After twenty years, and north of fifty, I'd never used it.

The first time I came to South Bear, I was nine years old. We'd arrived in Decorah and left Marion in town, dropped off our gear at the campground, and stopped at a bait shop, where Dad wound wispy, blue line into our reels.

"Fishing in a stream for trout is different from fishing in a river or at the Sand Pits," he said. "The trout streams are so clear and shallow that the fish can see you up on the bank." Dad grinned, a strand of blue fishing line in his teeth. Then Dad drove David and me out to South Bear.

"You see over there? Where them willows and box elders give way to the tallgrass? Where the creek takes a meander away from the bluff? That's where we're headed." Dad led us, rodtip pointed in the direction he walked. David and I trailed behind, toting our own fishing gear. The creek murmured quietly from behind the stand trees.

When we finally caught up with him, Dad was standing at the edge of the stream, below a steep, grassy bank that years of rushing water had eroded away. That's where I saw South Bear Creek for the first time. Dad was tying a hook onto his line at the edge of a widening in the stream; the water was clear and gurgling, feeding one end of the pool like a vein feeds a heart and emptying out the other end, an artery feeding the holes downstream. I watched Dad cast his near-invisible blue line, over and over, into that hole, letting his fly float down over the rocks, and past the watercress. Grasshoppers were everywhere in the weeds, thrumming, flying, chewing. Eventually, we moved upstream and stayed all day, moving from hole to hole. We didn't catch anything but a few suckers, which we threw back.

I looked at the dark circle your glass had left on the picnic table. A mosquito landed on my forearm and started sucking. I slapped it, leaving a splat of my own blood on my skin. I hadn't tried fly fishing since I was kid. In fact, it was Marion's father who had taught me, on Lake Wylie in South Carolina, using poppers to catch bluegills—he called them "bream"—with an old bamboo fly rod that he let me keep and take home with me. That rod was what I used for

trout fishing with Dad for most of my youth, even though I never fly casted with it. Rather, I simply used it like you would a normal rod and reel.

I finished my bourbon, and returned to my car. Placing the cooler in the trunk, I noticed that fly reel and rod Dad had given me on that Father's Day long ago, tucked into a recess with some camping gear. *It looks like a nice rod*, I thought, slamming shut the trunk.

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Anne was pregnant with Lizzie when Mom died. Henry was one. Dad got to meet them both, but died less than a year after Mom. Over the next decade, my business went to hell, I got into some legal trouble, did my own bid in prison, and divorced. And now, here I am at Scoreboard. Maggie's here, too, on the other side of the bar. I'm ignoring her, but every now and then, I catch her looking over toward me to see if I'm looking back. Instead, I stare at the row of TVs hanging over the bar. You can see a handful of screens from any of the barstools. Not a bad seat in the house, I guess. That older guy with the exotic young girlfriend his here. He's tall and white, with glasses, a weak chin, and a paunch the pulls his inevitable golf shirt taut just before it droops over his belt. He never smiles. She, on the other hand, looks like she may be Latina or maybe Middle Eastern, dark hair, big almond eyes, and smiles easily—at him, at Matt behind the bar, at me if she catches me looking at the necklace that dangles into the "V" of her collar, just above her cleavage.

Funny thing about Scoreboard—I saw my daughter on TV here. For real. One time, not long after I started coming in, they had the high school tournaments on. I don't recall which it was—one of the winter sports, basketball or hockey. But I looked up, and there was Lizzie—on every screen in the place. My heart thumped, and I had to fake like something was in my eye because I just about bawled right into my bourbon.

She's sixteen, and I hadn't seen her, or Henry for that matter, in months—and damn if she wasn't the spitting image of my mom at that age. I came back to Scorecard every night that week and the next, just hoping to spot her on the screen one more time. She's in the pep band at her school and plays the bass drum at the games. I guess the team must have done pretty well, since they made the tournament. When they showed the band on TV, Lizzie was right down in front of all the horn players, bouncing her red (sometimes pink, sometimes blonde, I noticed)

ponytail, and banging that drum like a trooper in her blue-and-white rugby shirt. Those wide, horizontal stripes made the band look like a musical chain gang, stacked up in the bleachers. Sometimes, in between numbers, I spotted her in the background, leaning back against the wall, looking at her phone. I got her that phone last year. Well, I bought a phone, and I sent it up to her mom for her to give to the kid. So, I think it's probably the phone I got her. But I can't be sure; you never can, these days. Anyway, she lives with her mom in Hopkins, the next suburb up, where she goes to school.

It's been about six years since Anne divorced me, after I got busted. No—not for anything like what Dad did. I set up some real estate deals that turned out to be not so smart on my part, and then the economy went to hell, and well, you know. Anyway, I tried to explain to Anne that I did everything I did to try and take care of our family—which I thought was true at the time, but really I was afraid. Afraid to fire employees, afraid to fail, afraid what Anne would think of me if I did. But she said she couldn't be married to a felon. It occurred to me that she didn't have any problem with it until I got caught, but that wasn't a winning argument, either. And since Ann is a lawyer, I have to admit that it would probably be bad for business to be married to me.

Anyway, I spent a little over a year—56 weeks to be exact—at the federal camp up in Duluth. They built it out of some old Air Force Reserve barracks, and it's right next to the airport. Every couple years, there's a big air show up there, and you can see the whole thing from the camp: fighter jets screaming just above the hangars and trees and dorms, then turning straight-up and shooting into the sky, glinting in the sun like daytime stars, we inmates in our green, half-soldier-half-janitor fatigues, gawking up at the planes with their roaring afterburners, spitting out contrails, acrid plumes of Jet-A drifting down, stinging our eyes and nostrils.

The camp staff and their families would sit right up against the fence, on the other side of a line that we weren't allowed to cross, enjoying the show's best free seats. I know Lizzie and Henry would've loved it. That was the hardest part about being there—thinking about how much I must have fucked up my kids. After I got out of Duluth, I thought maybe Anne might take me back, since I was done with my bid and we seemed to get along okay while I was inside. When she said no, it pretty much broke me. "Don't you love me?" I asked. "We were married sixteen years. We have kids," I said. She shrugged—just a little, her shoulders barely moving the lose fabric of her blouse.

"I don't trust you."

I suppose it makes sense that she wouldn't trust me, but like I said, I felt pretty broken up when she wouldn't take me back. I was hurting pretty badly, and I just felt like I had to get out of town, had to get out of Minneapolis. I got a wild hair up and decided I would "drift on down to New Orleans," you know, like the song says. I know. Who the hell does that? Listen to a song and does what is says? Well, it turned out to be another less than stellar move on my part. Everything went sideways down there. I used up everything I had and came back to town broker than ever, with my tail tucked firmly between my ass cheeks.

Anyway, after I saw Lizzie on TV, I called up David, my brother—he still talks to Anne; for a while I thought maybe he was fucking her, but now I'm not so sure—and asked him to let her know that I wanted to see Lizzie and Henry. When David called me back, he told me that Anne said it was up to the kids.

This week, David left me a message that Lizzie wants to see me, too. Didn't hear about Henry. That hurts a little. Hopefully, he'll come around. I think Liz must be seventeen by now, and last

time I saw her, she was just starting high school. Or maybe it was tenth grade. All I know is that I'm nervous as hell. She's going to be here in a couple hours. I don't know if Anne is bringing her, or David, or hell, maybe she's even driving herself now.

I feel miserable about not being in touch, but I didn't know—and maybe still don't—what to say to the kids or how to talk to her about how bad I fucked up. I was embarrassed and figured they probably were, too. And hurt because I let them down. I figured they needed some time to adjust, so I thought I'd stay out of their way for a few months. Then time just slipped by and… and I guess I just didn't know how to get back to being their dad. Now I'm rotting from the inside out, prostate cancer, just like my own dad, the sonofabitch, and time's a-tickin'.

And I've missed being a dad—like I was before I ever got locked up. Just the four of us going up north, finding a park or a patch of woods, sleeping in a tent under the stars, making fires, and fishing in the rushing little rivers that run into Lake Superior. The rivers were so narrow that they looked more like what we'd call a creek back in Iowa. But it didn't matter. We'd hike in that cool air, Anne and me on either side of Lizzie and Henry, holding their hands...

Damn.

I nod to Matt down the bar. He lifts the flat, orange-labeled bottle up from the rail, and pours Bulleit 'til my glass is almost full.

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VITA

Trent Jonas earned his B.A. in English Writing from the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities and his J.D. from Hamline University School of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is a former lawyer. As a freelance writer, his work has appeared in *Mitchell Hamline Law Review, USA Today, Minnesota Daily, Daily Eastern News, San Francisco Gate, AZ Central,* and *Houston Chronicle,* as well as on sites such as OnlyInYourState.com and StepOutside.org. Since 2018, he has worked as a legal researcher and writer at a criminal defense law firm in Minnesota. He is the proud father of two adult children and will go out of his way for a slice of rhubarb pie.

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