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People This Body Has Housed

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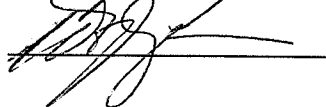
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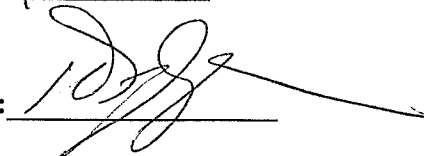
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Thesis Title:

"People This Body Has Housed"

Thesis Approved in final form:

Date: 9/14/16

MFA Director signature : _____

The People This Body Has Housed

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The People This Body Has Housed

Growing up in my parents' seventies-era ranch house, my body was a misshapen thing. During playtime it became an imagined monster as my brothers hid inside a spaceship—my mother's comforter supported by their small feet. I sat outside the warmth of the cover, relegated to outer space while my brothers organized an attack. While the waterbed made waves, they lay on their backs, kicking, and I tried to avoid their feet, which blindly shot at the air in pursuit of me, the Giant Space Pig. I was the rotund monster, aware of why I was cast in the role. I lunged at the spaceship with a ferocity that was not part of the act; it was aimed at the part of me I couldn't control: my hunger.

In that childhood house, there was a snapshot of me hanging from my brother's wall, a brown-eyed girl chomping into a sloppy joe like she'd never tasted one: evidence of my greatest weakness. I thought I would never be anything but that picture, hung up to taunt me. I had a taste for everything and a ceaseless growling. I tried to evade hunger, but it always found me. When my brother was out, I would sneak to his room and stare at the picture—contemplating how to make it disappear—but I knew it would exist even after it became ashes. Destroying the picture would not turn me into the slimmer girl I wanted to be. It's been decades since I stared at the hard copy on the wall, but I can still see that girl: frizzy brown curls brushed out and chubby arms erupting from a too-tight purple tank top with spaghetti straps.

I tried to be thin. I got asthma when I ran too hard, but I played baseball in the backyard, biked miles on the hilly country roads by our house. In high school I spent weeks eating cucumber sandwiches and doing crunches on the cool cement floor of the basement. At school I'd skip lunch and tell people I was fasting as a form of prayer; I pretended to be righteous, but

mostly I just prayed for my stomach to stop growling. I stared longingly at skinny girls who ate French fries and pizza but whose bodies maintained an acceptable size, wondering why life was so unfair. I thought our bodies were supposed to be homes, and homes were supposed to feel safe, but I couldn't find peace in my body, or in my parents' ranch house. Loved ones would say things like, "Your body is a temple" or "You only get one body, so take care of it." I knew those were only nice ways of calling me fat. I felt only contempt for my body—for always making things hard, for not being a forgiving body like other girls lived in.

My thoughts were consumed by fatness, and my bedroom was the only place where I sometimes forgot it. I covered the walls with things prettier than me: pictures of Hanson and 'N Sync clipped from magazines, art projects, souvenir postcards. The wall became so saturated with posters and ticket stubs that the sky-blue paint was hardly visible. One of the few spots where blue peeked through was a round dent on the wall near my bed. It had been there since I was five. I remember my brother grabbing my feet and spinning me round and round. It had felt so joyous, like I was flying—until his hands slipped and I was soaring toward the wall. I can finger the head-sized dent, its fractured edges, but I don't remember the pain. Instead I remember the moment of floating before impact—the only time I ever recall feeling light.

My childhood home became a monument to the thing I couldn't control. Even the cracks in my parents' driveway recalled the moment when my oldest brother introduced me, age sixteen, to his girlfriend as his "fat sister." To him, my fatness was the only thing worth noting. For years I could not escape that moment: every time my hand-me-down Cadillac gasped into the driveway, the tires rolled into the spot where the words still hung in the air.

That house remains a monument to my shame. The snack cabinet still sits in the dining room, the late afternoon sun hitting it like an invitation. Even at age twenty-eight, when I open the door on a weekend visit I half expect to see my father giving me a disappointed look that says, “Why can’t you stop eating?” or “You have no self control.” I imagine words like “You’re no daughter of mine,” though those words never came from his lips. His messages were subtler. Things like: “It’s harder to lose weight once you get older,” or a chuckle that unwittingly escaped when my brothers teased me. But my body came from somewhere, from someone. I tried to blame genetics; I tried to blame the body, not myself. It was easier if me and my body were separate things.

When I left my childhood house and found a home within the cell-like confines of a dorm room, I hoped I could feel less at odds with my body, that my bloated limbs would have a second chance. Like the barren room—white walls and plain pine furniture—I could be made anew. I could put up posters, buy a new set of orange extra-long sheets and a shiny new mini fridge. I could meet people who knew nothing of my former home, of the cracks in the driveway or the snapshot on my brother's wall. I could pretend my body was something other than fat.

In my freshman dorm, I found a boyfriend—one who loved my curves, the lilting halo of frizz on my head, my rosy too-round cheeks. I tiptoed toward believing that my body and I didn’t have to be separate entities, that perhaps I could be at peace within it. Underneath my bright new sheets, my boyfriend’s warm legs wrapped around mine, my body felt like something worth offering. For the first time, “naked” and “ashamed” didn’t seem like synonyms. But I didn’t learn to love my body—only to let it be loved, to be wanted—so when the relationship ended, my own contempt for it remained.

When I graduated from college, life was so desperate that I moved into a third-floor walk-up with the brother who'd made me and my sloppy joe famous. In the midst of the recession it took twenty applications to find a part-time job delivering pizzas. It took months to wrestle down a phone interview for a entry-level reporting job I didn't get. Instead, I got a second job as a waitress. People did not want the parts of me I'd expected to sell—my wit, my attitude, the skills I'd spent four years learning. I formed a new hypothesis: Perhaps my body was a product, a commodity that could be traded for feelings other than failure.

When I got off work late at night, I would go out. I'd find a man whose eyes landed on me and revel in feeling wanted, if only for a few minutes. Sometimes I would take him home, let his hands remind me what it was like to be desired. But in the morning, I always returned to reality, the lumpy rollout mattress I was lying on, the minuscule balance in my bank account, the fact that my brother was in the next bedroom. I lived on a diet of bologna, on-sale Pasta-Roni, and discounted food from my two jobs. My body grew larger, engulfing me further.

My body was not me; I didn't live there. It was something I was riding in. It would walk to the car, to work, to the tables I waited on, to the doors where I delivered pizzas and hot wings. During the day, I would ride in my body on cruise control. At night I would do shots of cheap cherry vodka at my apartment and go out on the balcony, hoping to free myself from the bland, off-white walls, from the feeling that I would never land in a place, or a body, that felt like home. Even on the patio with stars as my ceiling, the cold wind of a summer evening pricking my arms into goosebumps, I felt claustrophobic.

But as it turned out, my escape from the apartment came early—I left before the lease ended, banished from my room on the third floor by a pelvis, broken in two places after a car

accident. I moved back to the childhood house I had tried to leave, under a doctor's instructions not to bear weight on one side. Relegated to a reclining seat on my parents' couch, I began to miss my body's imperfect former life. Its bones were too big, its appetite too robust, but I missed the way it moved. I missed the way my hips swayed on a dance floor, the way I could weave around other servers at my job without thought or walk thoughtlessly through the neighborhood.

After twelve weeks, I was allowed to put weight on my left leg, and I walked out of the doctor's office on weak limbs. Reveling in the return of my freedom, I left my parents' house a few weeks later and moved into a house with friends. My joints were stiff and my steps were unbalanced as I hauled boxes up the stairs of the split-level and into my new bedroom. It was a small room that smelled like the last occupant's cats, but it *was not* a couch in my parents' living room. In this house my roommates felt like comrades, other twenty-somethings who were beautifully imperfect, like me: another waitress with a bachelor degree, one who was taking college courses at a crawl, a couple of girls nearing graduation—the dumping ground I'd been at a year ago. We were a house of unfinished women, and I didn't feel so alone.

We lived near the end of the street where there was a rocky trailhead leading into a park. The trail beckoned from my window, and on free afternoons I found myself there. The grounds were full of hills that made my weakened glutes burn with each footfall, but I loved the climb. I loved the way my muscles—disregarded for months—suddenly felt like working components inside my machine of a body. I was no longer stuck in an oppressive living room with a broken body, but was instead confined to a life I didn't want. I had little control over the lack of job prospects, or the feeling of failure that was a persistent scribble on the margins of my life. The job market was non-existent, and I couldn't gain the experience each company kept telling me I

needed. I didn't know the right people. A man at a computer somewhere was sending me a rejection letter without seeing my face.

And so, for the first time, my body became the one thing I could control. In a life of impossibilities, I strove for something possible. I decided to test my body, to turn my walk into a trot. I had never run farther than the mandatory miles required in my high school gym class, but I decided to trust that my body could do more than I'd believed.

Each free afternoon I would throw on old yoga pants and a sports bra, gulp down the embarrassment of my jiggling limbs, and run. At first, I could only run a quarter mile at a time, letting my wheezing body recover before launching forward again. But with each day, my body propelled me farther. I ran past the piercing pain in my side. I let pain drive me. The shin splints and sore knees and burning thighs became new things to conquer.

I began to know the aching of my lower back or the brutal cramping of my calves like I knew the head-shaped dent in my childhood bedroom. I could pinpoint the exact place on my hip where my joints rubbed together, like I could point to where my Hanson poster used to be, even though the wall had been painted over years ago. And in knowing my body, in knowing its strength, I found determination in the rest of my life. My body had always felt like the one thing holding me back, but it became the thing driving me forward. I began to control my life instead of letting it control me.

That was five years ago. Since then, my body has run countless 5ks and a half marathon, but sometimes it still betrays me. Sometimes I am still the little girl hungrily eyeing a sloppy joe. The reconciliation is ongoing. My body is still too hungry, still bigger than I want. In my townhouse, I walk up and down stairs. I wear my Fitbit like a talisman. I hop onto the trail down

the block and run for miles under the shade of trees. When I am mid-way through a three-mile run, sweat dripping from my forehead toward the planes of my face, I can feel my heart thumping, so steady, in my chest. I think of how my heart is inside this body, how it is the only home my indispensable organ has ever known. Back in the townhouse I strip off my soaked t-shirt and stare in the mirror. I flex my left leg, watching the thigh muscles expand. I pull my sweaty curls from my face. I trace the curve of my butt with my eyes.

I think of all the people this body has housed: a brown-eyed girl defined by her hunger; a college student who found hope under a pair of new orange bed sheets; a tipsy girl who stood under the stars wishing to be anyone else. I have tried to leave those people behind, but they are still with me. This body has been a thousand people and it will be an infinite number more, and still, I wonder if it will ever feel like home.

An Equation: Solve for Father

+ 3

I am a scraggly-haired four-year-old. I like to stay up late, so I tell my mother I am Cinderella, that I have to be awake at midnight. She nods her head, saying I can stay up in my bedroom. “Go tell your Dad goodnight,” she says. I run into the living room and crawl up into the worn, brown recliner. I give my daddy a kiss on the lips. His beard tickles, and I giggle on his lap as I tell him goodnight. I slide back onto the carpet and teeter toward my bedroom, sleep already catching up with me.

- 3

My family is canoeing down a river in Indiana, and I feel small within the long boat. My mom has my two older brothers in her canoe, and I can see them farther downstream. My dad is leading a canoe with my sister, the oldest, and me and my little brother, who is still toddling. As my sister and dad paddle, my brother and I eat pretzels and try to see past our big orange vests. When we get bored, we start throwing our snacks into the water for the fish.

Up ahead, my brothers have tipped their canoe. We see three sopping heads and orange life vests above the water, trying to grab the overturned canoe. We see them swim toward the shore, boat in tow. When the water gets shallow, my father tells my sister to help him stop the canoe. I hear their feet thud against the metal as they bring it to a halt. We are in a gently bubbling section filled with round rocks, the water less than a foot deep. I wonder why we have stopped, but I don't worry. My dad picks me up and moves me toward the water. Confused and terrified, I squeal, “No, Daddy! No! I'll Drown!” He ignores my screams; he doesn't pause. He drops me

into the water with a chortle, and I sit on the river bottom, feeling the cool water seep into my pants as if they're a leaky boat. I wait for his arms to swoop me back up, but when they don't I wait for the water to take me. I will get washed down the river as my father watches; I will never see my family again. My face is wet with tears when my father pulls me from the stream.

- 2

It is summer, and my parents have bought us a new pool. It is the kind with vinyl sides covered in colorful fish that rolls out of a box. It's not full-sized like the one my friend down the street has, but I'm grateful as the pool fills with foot-deep water. I pull out the inflatable, yellow float and hop on top. It's an odd shaped floaty—like an escape pod for a space ship, or a robotic hand. My little brother splashes beside me. In moments I am bored, and jump out of the pool. I search the yard for a paddle, something that will turn my float into a row boat. I find a pile of abandoned wooden slats. I grab a board about two feet long and run back. I slide back onto the float and push myself around, the piece of wood scraping the blue vinyl bottom. I am a sea captain, and I row around the obstacle that is my brother. Soon I notice the water isn't as deep, and I run inside to tell my dad. The pool is nearly empty when he comes outside, his feet leaving prints in the mud.

My father finds two small holes in the middle of the soft vinyl floor. I show him my boat, my paddle, and his eyes grow large. I look at the board, finally noticing the bent nail sticking out one end. I have ruined my perfect new pool with my foolishness. I cannot bear to look anywhere but the ground, and I say I am sorry, but my Daddy doesn't care. "You ruined the pool!" he says. "You could have hurt your brother!" I keep saying I'm sorry, that I didn't know. He picks me up, and heads downstairs. This is where my brothers get spanked when they are bad. But I am good,

and this was a mistake. I have never felt the fury of his palm. But my father's hand doesn't care, and I cry and cry. I feel like his hand has dealt a hundred blows when he stops. "You need to be more careful," he says. "You need to pay attention." I am sorry for being stupid. I will always be sorry for being stupid.

- 3

I am sixteen, and my father wants to talk. I roll my eyes and continue reading my magazine. "Now," he says. I lay the magazine down. He takes me downstairs, to my older brother's dim room. The walls are covered with blurred photographs of my brother's pale-skinned girlfriend with her black corsets and bright, bleached blond hair. What could we have to talk about in this place? Why not the kitchen, or my parents' bedroom, where there are at least chairs? We both sit on the bed, low to the ground, in the room farthest from sunlight. As my eyes adjust to the dark, he starts talking about sex.

"I'm actually kind of grateful that you're a bigger girl," he says, "because I haven't had to worry as much about you with boys." I hope he cannot see me flush, that my shame doesn't glow in the dark. I groan and remind him he drew me diagrams of sexual organs at grandma's kitchen table when I was ten. I know about sex.

"I want to make sure you know how to use a condom," he says, opening my brother's dresser. "I'm sure he's got some in here; he's always down here boinking his girlfriend." He pulls out a foil square and looks for an object to demonstrate with.

"Wait a minute," he says, and heads upstairs. I cannot move. All I can see is my scrawny, dark-haired brother having sex. I wonder if my dad will follow if I run upstairs and out the door

and never stop. Instead I sit until he returns with a bottle of aerosol perfume, and I hear the crinkle of foil.

- 1

It's the summer before my junior year at college, and my father is driving me the five hours home from my summer job in Ohio. My dad drives an old Taurus with a broken radio, and for the first hour or so, the silence keeps us company. A couple hours in, he starts talking. I try to stare out the window, concentrating on my reflection in the glass, chewing on the inside of my cheek. He says my mother has taken away everything he enjoys, that he cannot sit and read his newspapers or watch the nightly news. She nags him as soon as his butt reaches the recliner. It's as though she doesn't want him to be happy.

"Your mother only wants me for sex," he says, and my eyes widen, my desperation reaching eleven. "Well, you're a woman," he says, turning to me. "What do you think?"

I struggle for words, but I am not equipped for this conversation.

"I don't think she's trying to make you unhappy," I say, hoping it's enough to halt the conversation. When he starts talking again, I sink lower into the upholstery, pretending I am somewhere else until he sees a sign for Bob Evans and the car swerves onto an exit.

+ 5

It is spring, and I am nearing college graduation. I am in my bedroom back home, culling through fossils of my childhood. I dig through boxes of old notes written on wide-ruled paper and wrinkling certificates of recognition, the points on the gold foil crests bent in all directions. My father walks in, and pauses. I look up, waiting.

“Your mother told me that you’ve been paying for school yourself,” he says, and I nod. He continues explaining how he’d thought they were paying the bills, that my mother doesn’t keep him abreast of their finances. I keep nodding, the only language I know how to speak with my father.

“I know when you were in high school we said we’d help you pay for school,” he says. He pauses, and the silence acknowledges what we both know, what I’ve known for a while: my parents don’t have the money to pay for my school; it evaporated in an attempt to get my brother sober. He stares at me again. “I just wanted you to know,” he says, “That I am proud of you.” The words are foreign to my ears. I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing, and as he leaves the room I feel a lump in my throat.

- 1

I fumble for the lock on my parents’ front door, trying to see the keyhole in the 2 a.m. blackness. When I finally jiggle it open, my boyfriend and I shuffle into the house, trying not to make noise. We are not as quiet as we’d hoped, and a figure slips out from my parents’ bedroom as we stumble into my brother’s old room. My dad has slipped on his steel-toed work boots with no pants, his pale legs jutting out from an old pair of tighty-no-longer-whities. His arms are crossed in his old, red, Rose Hulman sweatshirt, as he asks about our night, and I tell him about our visit with one of my high school friends. My dad stands in the doorway talking for ten minutes before he retreats back into the bedroom, with a slosh of his waterbed.

“What was that?” asks my boyfriend.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Your dad, in his underwear!”

“Oh, he does that all the time.”

+ 5

I have just gotten married, the union hours old. My husband and I finish swaying to the last chords of our song, and I feel the cake in my stomach. I brace myself for the next dance. As my husband leaves, my father approaches in his suit and the black Velcro tennis shoes he's been wearing since he hurt his foot a few weeks ago. “Bridge Over Troubled Water” plays, and he grabs my hand and we sway slowly, the space large between our bodies. I look down at my orange chucks and try to smile when I look back into his face. He used to sing this song when I was a kid, strumming along on his guitar, but I hadn't remembered it being this long. Our steps are stilted, and I mouth the lyrics so I don't have to say anything else. I wonder if everyone can sense how awkward I feel. We plod along like dancers in a music box, turning because we have to, until minute three when I feel a shift in my father's movement. Before I know what's happening, I am spinning away from his body, and then back toward it. I feel a real smile spreading across my face. *He twirled me! My dad just twirled me!* And all I can do is laugh.

- 2

My father has accepted a job in Indianapolis where I live. He is staying in a hotel with a weekly rate; he scrambles a carton of eggs at the start of each week and re-heats them each morning for breakfast. One night he stops by and stays for dinner. He tells me about his hotel. He's staying in a part of town I like to call the cusp, between fancy suburbs to the north, and barred windows and low-income housing to the south.

“I was walking to my room when this kid came and asked me for money for the pop machine,” he says. “So I turned and looked him in the eye and said ‘why should I give *you* money?’” My father’s inflection is confrontational.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” I ask.

“I’m not scared of him,” my dad says. “He should be scared of me. I punch to kill.”

The words sit in the air, and I wait for him to be joking, but instead he details how the exact blow to the windpipe could kill an attacker.

“What if he had a gun?” I ask.

“Then I would slit his wrist so he couldn’t use his trigger finger,” he says, “The last thing the robber expects is for his victim to be ready.”

- 2

I am twenty-seven, and my husband tells me about a conversation he and my father had in the children’s museum while I was with my nephew. “Your dad was talking about ‘gun to his head’ moments,” he says, and I nod tentatively. He tells me how my dad said the time I ran for homecoming queen was one, that my mother dragged him against his will. I try to think back to the homecoming game. I had worn a shiny yellow dress with black lace on the bodice that made me feel beautiful, and I had stood on the football field and waved at the crowd with the other nominees. I don’t remember my dad being there.

“So why didn’t he want to go?” I ask.

“He said, ‘Laura’s not exactly beauty queen material.’”

- 2

I am at my parents' place for the weekend. My father sits me down in his office. When I was younger, he says, he tried not to say much, because there's a correlation between fathers discussing weight and their daughter's eventual weight gain. But now, I am old enough to be talked to, and still overweight. He mentions my aunt who had a heart attack in her fifties, my uncle who died from heart failure. The implications are obvious. I want to remind him that I ran a half marathon a few months ago, that I am the only member of my immediate family with a gym membership, that my body will not bend into the proportions he expects. That I wish he could say he loved me in a way that didn't hurt.

Instead: "I know. I'm trying."

- 0

I am in college, home for the weekend. I am sitting in the living room when my father tells me he has Asperger's. He thinks most of his brothers have it. Some of his sisters as well. Maybe my siblings, too. He has become obsessed—like he's done with countless other things—with this word that now defines him. I nod, pretending to understand. He tells me I should take a screening online, and I keep nodding. When he is gone, all the moments when I'd wished for a different dad connect together in a constellation of his disorder. Does he have an excuse for the times he chuckled when my brothers called me a beached whale, for the times he'd made me feel like an idiot because I didn't know some obscure scientific fact? Should he be excused for the times he'd asked me a question but didn't wait for an answer? Should I be angry at him or his diagnosis? I want to know that when I throw a punch, it will be in the right place. I tell myself I am nothing like my father, but I take the screening anyway.

+3

I haven't yet reached school age, and I miss my dad. He comes home late from work. He goes on trips for days at a time. I stay at home with my mom and little brother, endlessly watching *The Land Before Time* or *The Little Mermaid*. I want to find a tree star. I want to go searching for dinosaurs. I want to be grown and pretty and red-haired. I want a fish to be my friend, because my little brother doesn't say much. I haven't seen my Dad for days, and then he walks in the front door at night, grinning. He hugs me, my little brother. He says hello to my older brothers. He returns to the door, grabbing a package he had set down. "Laura, I've got you something," he says. It is not my birthday, nor a holiday. It is just a special day because my dad is home. He reaches into the bag and pulls out a small, pink cardboard box with plastic on one side and hands it to me. I turn it over and see Ariel staring at me behind the plastic. She is thin like a Barbie, her legs made of soft plastic. She comes with a removable green mermaid tail and a pink plastic hair comb. I hand the box back to him, saying, "Open, it Daddy!"

=

I am a frizzy-haired twenty-seven-year-old, and I have a dream in which my father is dying. There is something like a gas leak he tries to turn off. Because this is a dream, it makes sense when he pauses to take the change out of his pocket, and hands it to me. He calmly sends me out the door. I wait in a garage nearby, playing with the coins in my pocket, until I hear the sound of the explosion. In the dream, I run back to the house. My father is still inside. I can see flames on the other side of the patio door, and my fingertips burn as I place my hands on the glass.

An Epicurean Tour, Age 14

London: English Breakfast

When I step off the plane at Heathrow, I believe this trip will be the single greatest experience of my life. The fashion, the bustle, the perfect accents that bounce in and out of my ear canals. I am far from small-town Indiana, and I feel cosmopolitan. I imagine when I start high school in a few weeks I will be a sleeker, more worldly version of my former self, glossy like models in magazines. I think Europe will seep into my blood, gift me secret intrigue.

We stay in a little brick hotel in a residential stretch not far from an Underground station. We are a group of seven, and in the months prior my parents scour the internet for affordable places, never the fancy hotels I've romanticized from movies. Each morning, the hotel staff serves us breakfast: eggs, bacon, black and white sausages, and beans. And not the sickly-sweet baked beans from back home, but more subtle beans in a sauce that leans closer to tomato than brown sugar. I wake each morning yearning for them. There is the wedge of tomato that adorns our plates, grilled a little on each side, smiling in the corner.

Breakfast is the preface to each day. It is a chorus, a refrain. Breakfast. Tower of London. Breakfast. Train to Stonehenge. Breakfast. Train to Windsor. Each morning, after scraping the last few beans off my plate we walk to the tube, where I chuckle every time the automated voice says, "Mind the gap!" By day three, I think I have it down. My younger brother and I take off on our own to the station, but we make a wrong turn somewhere. Eventually, we are lost on a street corner, arguing.

“I think we need to go this way,” says my brother.

“No, I know it’s this way,” I point in the opposite direction.

“No, it’s this way.”

“No, it’s not!” I say, my pitch rising.

Then, from a few feet away, an even higher-pitched voice: “No it’s not! No it’s not!” in a nasally tone to match the pseudo-Chicago inflection she’s using to impress her friends. The girl laughs as she walks past, proud of her deadpan American impersonation.

My brother and I wait for the girls to pass as my cheeks pulse with desire for battle. I take back the things I had written in my diary the day before—the excited mumblings that didn’t do justice to the joy I had felt. I no longer envy Londoners’ sleek outfits and smart shoes. I hate the Underground and its robotic warnings. I imagine the entire country getting fat off the Cadbury candy machines filled with milk-chocolate in each tube station. I even feel contempt for the beans.

One night my mother, sister and I split off from the boys. We try an Ethiopian restaurant while my father, pickier than most children, gets fish and chips with my brothers. My mom is joyous to try injera, the sour, spongy bread that is placed before us. She is tired of the bland roasts and potatoes my father requests back home. Her eyes sparkle as mysterious pots arrive, filled with unrecognizable meats and vegetables. I try not to gag on what seems like a strange excuse for bread. I stomach a few bites of an orange stew that seems to have both potatoes and pumpkin, before giving up. When we exit, I am looking forward to the pile of beans that will greet me in the morning once again.

Before we leave London I have a piece of apple pie a la mode in a café near the Underground station. It is catty-corner from the small market and adjacent to an Indian restaurant. I have flown across the Atlantic to eat warm pie dripping with scoops of vanilla ice cream, but when I eat it, I forgive London—just not the wretched girl on the street.

Stonehenge: Blueberry Scones

I fall in love with scones at Stonehenge. Despite the thousands of photographs that make the site look as though it stands aloof in the middle of nowhere, the area is awash in man-made clutter, including a stand offering warm scones with fresh butter. Later I will remember the stones and scones with equal amounts of nostalgia. Scones are a new experience, and the blueberry blasts in the buttery dough make me quiver with the pleasure of it. Yes, quiver. They are that good.

The ancient ruins are a short walk from a jam-packed parking lot, over-priced gift shop, and the aforementioned scone stand. As I near the boulders I am handed 90s-style headphones that engulf my head; they will talk me around the circle of stones. I wander around the circle with my siblings. My father follows close behind, barking whenever my brother gets too close to the thin chain between us and the stones. I am bored by the talking in my ears until I hear the part about the Slaughter Stone. It gets its name from the red flecks on its surface that were believed to be bloody remnants from past sacrifices. My joy over the warm scone is surpassed by my rabid interest in the gory sacrifices that had happened in front of me. I stare in awe still listening to the pre-recorded tour, but the red flecks are not actually blood, the voice begins to explain. My eyes follow my feet to the next stone where I continue to be disappointed: the reddish stains are simply iron deposits.

Rome: Pizza di Patate

The first day in Rome I am tricked into eating potato pizza. After paying several lira to pose with men dressed as Centurions, my younger brother and I eye the slices through the clear plastic of a food cart. We come from the land of pepperoni, and we've entered a strange and unfamiliar place. The slices are topped with weird looking peppers and mushrooms, something that might be capers, maybe spinach. But this is Italy, birthplace of pizza, and we must engage. We point at a docile looking piece of cheese pizza in the corner. The man takes our lira and hands it over. I bite before looking. What I thought was cheese crumbles into starchy pieces in my mouth. I realize the pizza is covered in thin lines of hash browns. I pass the pizza on to my little brother who bites into it with big eyes. Word of our pizza gets around and soon my mother and brothers have all bitten into the potato pie.

As we finish our slice and head toward the subway, my father warns us again about pickpockets. His research pinpointed Rome as a crime capitol, and his stories put us on alert. I can romanticize no one; every person seems like they want a look inside my pockets. My father hands half his traveler checks to my little brother, hoping his twelve-year-old face will prevent him from getting robbed. The rest of the money is placed in my father's pants, and he tells me to follow closely, with my eyes on his pocket.

As we wait for the train from the Coliseum back to our hostel, the station crowds with people. My eyes bounce from one person to the next, eying beautiful scarves, women with hairy armpits, several men who seem to be scrutinizing my pubescent body. When my eyes return to the pocket a brown hand is reaching toward it. I freeze.

As a finger is about to reach the money, I jolt forward, shoving the small man with my one hundred and sixty teenage pounds. He looks at me with big angry eyes before running through the doors of the train that have just opened. I look at my father, elated. The man hasn't gotten our money. I feel powerful, courageous; I am woman hear me roar.

"You were supposed to be watching," my father says, disappointment apparent. "You were supposed to stay right behind me."

He wants to say more, but we rush onto the train. Instead he stares at me red-faced and I watch as saxophonists traverse the car. My mom squeezes my shoulder and praises me, then scowls at my father. A nun stands next to her, nodding her head to the music. When we get off the train my mother's purse is slashed on one side, the nun the only suspect. My sister's wallet is missing, too, and a gypsy woman runs from the car as my father yells "Polizia!" fruitlessly.

Venice: Pasta di Famiglia

We go by train from Rome to Venice, and I fall in love as soon as I leave the train station. It is a sunny afternoon, and the grand *Ponte degli Scazi* greets us just outside, its white stone steps expanding over the Grand Canal. The walkways are tight with people, and every street begins to look the same—filled with gelato carts and merchants selling brilliant colored beads, but I'm not wary like I was in Rome. I buy a peach gelato cone that ruins me for American ice cream and a necklace of Venetian glass beads. There is a friendliness to the bustle, and I squeeze past pedestrians saying *mi scusi* as if I were a real Italian. A few of us squeeze into a Gondola and glide down the river while our gondolier, Fabio, sings in a robust vibrato.

When the sun sits lower in the sky, we find a restaurant and sit at a long table set with jars of crunchy breadsticks. We munch on the long crackers while we peruse the menu, which has pasta dishes that are recognizable. My sixteen-year-old brother pulls out his ID and proudly orders a beer. “Regular or large?” the waiter asks. My brother asks for a large as my mother frowns, but says nothing. My father isn’t concerned until the beer is slid onto the table—a stein holding about three pints of lager. I resent the fact that I am not yet sixteen and eye the brew jealously.

We eat bowls of familiar pasta and sauce and watch my brother’s face blush as the level of his drink lowers. When he has finished half his beer, my parents nudge him to stop drinking, but he chugs on indifferently. When we leave the restaurant he has finished all but a few sips and stumbles out the door. My father’s face has begun flush red, too. We walk back toward the train station, him glaring at my drunken brother, occasionally muttering things like “You’re being a jerk” toward his set of bleary eyes. My mother’s usually friendly face is marred with anger, too, but hers is aimed at my father.

Munich: Chicken McNuggets

We stop in Munich to see the Glockenspiel at Marienplatz. Essentially a giant cuckoo clock, its figures turn round, telling stories as the mechanism chimes. This is a short stop, because we have to carry on toward our next destination, the Cathedral in Koln.

We hunt for food in a hurry, and in the heart of Munich, we go to McDonald’s, its yellow arches like a beacon for homesick Americans. We are tired of being surprised. The burger joint has a stone façade, boasts multiple floors, and looks out on a courtyard with a fountain. The

Parthenon of fast food. My younger brother and I order Chicken McNuggets. My older brother starts chomping on a cheeseburger before he remembers my father's warning of Mad Cow Disease. The whole continent's cows could be tainted, he'd said. We'd avoided beef successfully for a week, but now my brother is gambling with fate. My father yells at him to put the hamburger down, but he keeps chomping rebelliously.

Paris: Pasta con Tonno

In Paris we stay in a prison that sells itself as a hostel. It has small concrete rooms with whining metal bed frames flanking each wall. There is a "continental breakfast" served in the lifeless dining room: a hunk of warm French bread and a choice of cappuccino or hot chocolate from the type of machine you find in gas stations and hospital waiting rooms.

In my dreams, the streets of Paris had gleamed with the romance of La Tour Eiffel, but as I walk through town gnawing on my hunk of bread, I have to dodge the flow of sewage between the sidewalk and the street. And it doesn't smell like perfume and future romances; it smells like a bathroom stall in need of a cleaning.

Following an afternoon at the Picasso museum, and a walk back through the grey streets on the North side of the Seine, we end up at a small café for dinner. The menu contains an assortment of things I cannot translate or have never heard of. My size fifteen pants are proof that I look at food with vigor, but this menu is perhaps my greatest challenge yet.

My father shows off by translating the menu, while my family shares irritated glances and I stare at the beautiful, dark-haired Parisian boy who is our waiter. He is probably about

eighteen, and tells us the specials in English, catering to the stupid Americans. I hear the word tuna and nod my head. It is easier than parsing through the menu, and I am so smitten I would say yes to anything the Parisian boy asked. I get lost in daydreams of us walking the streets of my imagined, urine-free Paris hand in hand, our feet tapping along the shiny cobblestone. I let myself hope that the boys here are different. Perhaps they will notice my sophistication instead of my size. Maybe the waiter will be enchanted by my American accent.

When dinner arrives, I realize I erred in choosing. My plate contains some sort of pasta with raw tuna dancing atop it. I am from small-town Indiana, so Sushi is still an urban myth to me, and the sight of raw fish makes me want to retch. I try a bite of the tuna, feel its slimy flesh in my mouth before quickly swallowing. The rest of dinner I carefully dive my fork in and out, avoiding the rest of the barely-dead fish. When the waiter comes by I try to flutter my eyelashes and tell him how good the food was; as he walks away I realize I probably look like I'm twitching.

My father pays the bill and my family gets up to leave; I want to stay a few more minutes so our waiter has time to see into my soul. We can exchange addresses, write each other romantic letters and eventually, travel the world together. As we walk away from the café I glance back, hoping he will be looking, too; that's what always happens in the movies. But the Parisian boy is simply swiping my uneaten plate of tuna from the table and heading toward the next with the same smile he gave me.

Amsterdam: Niks

In Amsterdam, I don't eat anything, or at least it seems that way. By the end of our stop, I feel empty. We walk to the Van Gogh museum where I peer intently at *Skull with a Burning Cigarette*, realizing that the artist's life had been more than the sunflowers and cherry blossoms I'm familiar with. My older brothers disappear for a few hours and return with red eyes, perfumed in a skunkish smell. When we take a series of wrong turns and end up in the red light district, my parents rush us past the neon pink pornographic figures and sex shop windows, past the leather-clad ladies on the street. My dad chuckles at the flashing signs, but my pious mother tries to hide the sacrilegious shop windows with her body.

Our hotel is above a restaurant, and the tacky, red carpeting drenches every inch. The room drowns in a bright Christmas red. My father's anger erupts, perhaps because my brothers have gone somewhere they were warned not to, perhaps because one of us speaks at the wrong moment. It is not an everyday sort of annoyed, but a fury that matches the walls.

This is the room where my father yells, "We're getting a divorce!" loud enough that the diners below us probably hear. While my siblings and I stand frozen, my father breaks the only rule of parent/child divorce conversations when he glares at my sixteen-year-old brother and tells him it is his fault. My mother huffs at my father and disappears downstairs.

The next day, we will walk the stairs of the Anne Frank house, and as they grow narrower, steeper, I will feel sorry for Anne Frank. But then I will feel sorry for myself and for my broken family. I will think again of the wretched red walls and feel hungry.

The Smallest God

For more than a decade, I've had a photo of a dark-haired girl tucked within pages of my high-school diary. In it, her arm is raised in the air, as if she is claiming power, or freedom, or willing herself strength. The photo was over-exposed, so the colors are blurred where they should be focused, the composition giving it an ethereal quality, as if she is stuck in a dream world. Her face is blurred, but I know it is her, I know the shape of her small body against the sunlight and the dark silhouette of leaves. Collette.

I was the first to see the tip of Pike's Peak rise on the horizon from the backseat of our big, white twelve-passenger van. My Midwestern brain transmitted signals to my chest—creating a fluttery tightness. We had driven for two days from Indiana toward Colorado, and the hours in the van were finally worth it. The goliath rocks across the sky felt like a mirage. I forgot everything else: my usual hum of adolescent self-hatred, my crush on the boy in front of me—with his dyed black hair and as much rebellion as one can fit in a Christian youth. I forgot my friends who sat beside me on the van's bench seat. For a moment, it was me and the mountain—a hulking promise of things I didn't yet understand.

But I wasn't in Colorado for the mountains—Colorado Springs was simply a side-trip on the way to our destination: The Ute Reservation, still four hours away in Towaoc. We were going there to teach a week of vacation bible school—one of many groups that would spend a single week with the reservation kids that summer.

The first afternoon, we gathered children in the churchyard, pushing them on the swings of the small wooden playset and drawing pictures in the dirt with them. The first child I met was named Snow. She was small, no more than five, with chubby cheeks and a timid smile. I think of her wearing white. I remember helping her climb up the side of the playset, and her looking down on us—a smiling, dark-haired angel in a world of dirt and paint-peeling ranch houses. I felt welcome among the children almost at once—but yet, it is hard to picture them. When I think of Towoac, the memories are more feelings than images.

The reservation is blurred, like a dream had just before waking. When I think back, I remember my fellow travelers more than I do the children. We were a group of around twenty—two vans of people ranging in age from about thirteen to sixty-five. We had a jolly-bellied leader who drove one of our vans. There was thirteen-year-old Jeffrey, the youngest member of our caravan; grey-haired Connie, the grandmother to our group; and Emily and Bryan (a couple), my high school friends who'd convinced me to take the trip. The faux-rebellious boy with dyed black hair who I had a crush on was named Jeffrey Brookes Wallace, and you had to say all three names.

But other names have been forgotten, and their faces are disappearing too, though I spent several days in a van with them. Mostly I remember the road and all the places along the way. One day we stopped in Kansas and some of the older boys dared me to chug a glass of Mountain Dew laced with parmesan cheese and red pepper flakes, all for a measly dollar. One afternoon while we were driving, little Jeffrey blurted out, "Look, there's a nude dude!" and sure enough, outside the window was a pinkish blur of a man, toting his clothing on his head. There were hours of inhaling the acidic stench of vomit after somebody threw up halfway through the twenty-hour drive.

The trip was two weeks long, but we spent only five days on the reservation. The rest were spent in vans, stopping at roadside attractions. We hiked up the Seven Falls in Colorado Springs. We took a twenty-dollar trainride to the top of Pike's Peak and ate freshly-fried donuts. We held gigantic albino pythons, and let hissing cockroaches be placed in our palms, ever so briefly. We had dinner on a ranch, complete with tin-cups, corn bread, and a country-western band. We watched a diving show while we ate dinner at Casa Bonita.

When I let myself look back at that trip—to truly examine it—it's hard not to be ashamed. Calling the excursion a mission trip was more than a white lie. I imagine our money—thousands of dollars when I start to add it up—could have helped the people of Towaac more than it helped us. Perhaps we could have mailed an envelope full of money and done just as much good. Or we could have found ways to help our own towns, our own communities. When I think too long about it, I get the urge to look up the people who helped sponsor my trip and send them their money back. I'm sorry it was spent on cheap thrills instead of truly experiencing a culture.

We didn't attempt to learn about the Ute tribe's tradition or heritage. Like so many other Caucasians before us, we tried to white-wash their lives. We weren't there to hear stories of their people, we didn't even ask what they were. We spent a single evening watching native dancing at a nearby heritage center, and then spent a week telling the kids our own personal fables—the ones of the Christian faith. I could use my naïve youth as an excuse, but part of me knows it never felt quite right—that there had been a tiny voice asking why our mission trip felt more like a parentless vacation.

I can't say life on the Ute reservation was pretty, and I can't say it wasn't. All I knew was the small church with peeling white paint where we drove during the hot days, between nights at an air-conditioned Methodist church in the nearby town of Cortez, where we kept our rows of air mattresses and a week's worth of clothing in a room off the clean, neatly-tiled hallway. In the mornings, church volunteers made us breakfasts like biscuits and gravy. Meanwhile, the tiny white church on the reservation was simply a chapel upstairs and steps covered in thin bargain carpeting leading into a basement with scuffed walls and a storage unit smell. The only other part of the reservation we saw up close was a recreation center with a swimming pool where we went with the kids one afternoon—bobbing in the water alongside all their little dark-haired heads. It didn't seem much different than the YMCA in my town.

Inside the small white church, we filled the children's summer days with dollar-store cookies and juice and "This Little Light of Mine." We talked about Jesus, told bible stories and gave hugs that benefited us as much as them. And I want to believe we did one modicum of good, but I would be lying if I said I made this trip selflessly. When I examine my past closely, I can see the real reason for my trip: I wanted to convince myself there was a God. Raised in a church, my religion felt only necessary, like a coat in the Midwestern winter. But I wanted to know the God who made people feel radiating love; I needed to feel that love. With my church friends, I pretended to believe, passionately. I thought if I pretended long enough it would become real. But I'm not sure if it ever did; the line between faith and the *desire* for it is still unclear. I was trying to sell God to children when I wasn't certain I believed.

I remember so many details about my trip, though most of them are devoid of meaning. But when I think of Collette I feel physical pain—an ache that is a combination of love and uncertainty. She was around nine that summer, and most days she wore a pair of long jeans and a t-shirt despite the summer heat. She had long black hair that fell to the middle of her back, and on the first day she seemed unaware of what a smile was.

“This little light of mine...” Scowl.

“I’m gonna let it shine.” Eye roll.

“This little light of mine...” Exasperated head lean.

“I’m gonna let it shine...” Tired frown.

Her expressions seemed older than her face, like she was habitually stuck at the tail end of a laborious business meeting. Her surly demeanor made her the antithesis of the cheerful people pleaser I’d been at her age. I was compelled to the challenge she presented, like a bee to sweet nectar.

I imagined her family was poor, destitute, hopeless. I thought life on a reservation could only be these things. I made myself a savior—a woman in a white hat. In my mind I created a fictitious life where her father was an alcoholic and her mother didn’t have time for her. And maybe part of my imagined story was true, but I had no proof of it. I lived on the assumption her life was terrible, because that’s what people had told me about people on the reservation. Otherwise, why were we there? I tried to nurture her, in the most subtle of ways. I wanted to relax her hardened face. During arts and crafts time we made God’s Eyes with rainbow yarn and twigs we found in the yard, and when she finished, I told her how lovely hers was. I could see

her face softening, the ends of her lips edging closer to a smirk. When we went outside to play I let her hop up on my shoulders and ran her around the yard, reluctant giggles finally escaping from her.

By Wednesday, I succeeded. When Collette showed up in the morning her scowl had transformed into a shy smile, and she gave me a hug. She followed me closely, curious brown eyes intent on me, occasionally grasping my hand. On Thursday, she ran to me with arms open and didn't leave my side until it was time to head home. With me, she laughed like she couldn't with the others. And I cared so much, so quickly—with a love that was light and unburdened with intentions. I wanted to protect her and free her all at once. The unconditional love between us was what I'd been expecting from God, finally the scraps of bread I had long been craving. But on Friday—our final day—Collette didn't appear.

There was no beautiful goodbye; instead, I worried where she was, whether something bad had happened. I wondered if I had only imagined the way her eyes turned from coal to chocolate when she saw me. When I developed the rolls of film from my trip, I slipped only the photo of her into my diary, the most perfect secret between its pages.

On a recent trip to Colorado Springs with my husband, I had the urge to return to Towaoc. We were in town to visit my sister, who'd moved out West not long after my first trip there. I was four hours north, but I couldn't keep the reservation town from my mind. I looked at Google street view, trying to get my bearings. Nothing sparked as familiar until I saw the image of the simple white church; it seemed like it was from a lost civilization, but one I had belonged to once. I had an unexplained urge to go there, but why? Did I want to understand the landscape with grown-up eyes? Was I just waxing nostalgic? Did I need to apologize?

Perhaps I just needed confirmation that one dark-haired little girl was okay: my Collette—the girl whose photograph still makes my chest hurt. She would be an adult now. Maybe she got a scholarship and went off to college, or maybe she was still there, trying not to choke in the dust from the reservation's dirt roads. I wanted to believe that Collette was better for having had me there. I wanted to rub the tarnish from my memories.

But all through the trip to Colorado, I said nothing. I didn't mention the hours I spent thinking about that little girl or that place I'd visited a decade before. My time with Collette had been sacred; it was not an anecdote for the open road. Instead of driving South to Towaoc we drove round Colorado Springs eating cupcakes and exploring rock formations, and I kept the secret of the no-longer-little girl inside me. I feared I had meant nothing, when she had meant everything. She was the only part of that trip that felt pure.

When I look back now, I think maybe I did find God on that trip. But it was not a version of Him I recognized. He was not the being my friends worshipped with songs written in major chords, not a book of poetic parables, not the group of people who lived in religion bubbles so thick they were nearly opaque. Now, when I think of God, I think of the mountains. I think of standing high above the world and watching tiny ants moving around, wondering where they will go next. I think of shy-eyed children and their reluctant dimples. I think of all the smallest things I cannot and should not control. And I think of one little girl, how I wish I could thank her for her love.

(Man)nequins

Maple Lane Mall, the stretch of shops in my hometown of La Porte, Indiana, had its fifteen minutes in 1989, when the movie *Prancer* used it to film a bustling holiday shopping scene. The film—a heartwarming Christmas tale about a little girl who heals a reindeer—made eighteen million on its first weekend, which was a respectable amount for something filmed in small, Mid-western towns. *Prancer*’s stars were Sam Elliot and Cloris Leachman, and its moderate success was likely due to its November release—just in time for the holidays.

Despite being a toddler when the movie came to theaters, I didn’t see it then. My parents didn’t waste money renting movies, and I never saw it play on the network channels, which were the only ones we got with our antenna. For a long time, the film was an urban myth to me, and when I got around to seeing *Prancer* I was a teenager. Much of the charm was lost on me, but the mall scene—where the protagonist, young Jessica Riggs, hopes the mall Santa might get a message to the *real* Santa—held me in rapture, and not just because of the creepy animatronic elves flanking Santa. The scene, which clocks in around two minutes, took me back to the mall that had existed when I was a kid, a bustling wood-paneled paradise that had become as much of a myth to me as the movie had been.

It’s hard to recall the details of the mall, but my memory takes me back to the arcade, Aladdin’s Castle, just inside the mall’s entry, with its inviting row of skee ball machines and the prize bar with my favorite fruit-flavored tootsie rolls. It seemed like I always ran into someone I knew there. And I remember the middle section of the building, where kids rode Santa’s legs like ponies in the cold winter months, held dozens of turn-crank candy machines and coin-operated

kiddy rides. My favorite was the helicopter that lifted you in the air after it swallowed your quarters, like riding a Smart Car into the sky. The only food aside from Baskin-Robbins ice cream was a mom and pop snack bar in the middle that sold burgers and chili cheese fries. It was like a miniaturized version of an old Legion Hall plopped in the middle of the mall. It was next to the little photo booth in the hall that led down to the bathrooms.

The place that existed in the movie, and in my childhood memories, was magical despite its mediocrity. Our mall didn't have multiple corridors, or escalators to ride up and down endlessly like the ones in nearby towns, but it still hummed with possibility. It hosted Girl Scout fashion shows and craft fairs, acting as a gathering place for our small town. For me, some of its allure was in the fact we seldom went; my dad had a decent engineering job, but with five kids there wasn't exactly a surplus of money. My clothes came from Wal-Mart or were purchased from the Fall JC Penney catalogue to fit my already too-big body. I wanted clothes that would make me stand out at school like I couldn't at home, so at the mall, I looked enviously at teenagers who bought their clothes there. It was a small stretch from the ever-changing department store at one end to the K-Mart flagship at the other, but the twenty-or-so storefronts in the middle were all filled. With its boutiques of brightly colored clothes, Baskin Robbins ice cream shop, and churning arcade, it was the type of place I could imagine Disney Channel stars sitting at while drinking smoothies.

As a kid, thriving malls felt like resplendent dream worlds. When I walked through the automatic doors into a shopping mall, it felt like walking into a world of opportunity. I thought buying jewelry at Claire's or a shirt on clearance at Rainbow could help me become more than the lower middle-class kid I was. I ached for the ability to walk through school in the coolest clothes and with the trendiest book bag; I wanted outfits that people would be jealous of—that

would draw attention from my thick thighs. You weren't cool unless you had "Abercrombie" boldly stamped on your chest, but those letters never touched my body.

I bought second-hand K-Swiss shoes and scrounged for shirts with recognizable logos at the Goodwill store. If I couldn't buy an amazing outfit, I could at least blend in with the cool kids. I can remember clearly the first time I bought a name brand shirt unworn by other humans. It was the eighth grade trip to Washington D.C., and my mother had given me a miniscule amount of spending money. My friend Courtney and I bought matching sky blue shirts with yellow lettering at the Aeropostale in the mall. It wasn't Abercrombie, but it was cooler than my Wal-Mart clothes. I stroked the cheap cotton like it was cashmere, simply because of the four letters emblazoned across: AERO. I thought you really could buy happiness.

But by the time I clutched my first name-brand t-shirt, my hometown mall had lost its allure. In the decade following its on-screen debut, it had become a joke. When I was in high school it had lost its glitz, its iota of glamour, and had instead become an indoor walking track for women of a certain age. As it declined, our mall housed increasingly atypical storefronts including the county BMV and a Karate studio. A game shop held strong for several years—hosting weekly tournaments of Magic the Gathering—and for a while, there was a Discovery Zone rip-off with indoor slides and ball pits where kids had birthday parties. At one point, a scuba gear store made its home there—right where the Baskin Robbins used to be. It seemed like the demand for ice cream should have been greater than the demand for scuba gear in our Midwestern town, but the shop's presence proved me wrong.

The Maple Lane Mall that existed when I was seventeen was a place teenage girls wouldn't be caught dead at. Fictional pop singer Robin Sparkle's wouldn't have written "Let's

go to the Mall!” if she’d gone to what was left of ours. Half the storefronts were empty and its only memorable occupants were a soon-to-close Sam Goody, a Chinese restaurant, a Hallmark store, a hair salon, and an ill-placed eye doctor. And of course, the K-Mart, which held some magical spell for longevity—staying in business while the K-Marts in surrounding towns folded. The mall built in the seventies hadn’t been able to groove into the new millennium; in an image-driven world, big chain stores wanted a visual presence that the aged inside of our mall couldn’t provide.

In high school my friends and I were so nostalgic for the mall that we chose it as the subject of a community research project. We wanted to understand the mall’s mysterious decline. When we walked past the orangey, 70s era, stone façade and into the mall, it was hard to imagine the place as anything but the sad, stagnant thing it had become. Some afternoons we hardly saw another soul walk its one long corridor. We spent hours looking at microfiche at the library finding old newspaper stories about the mall’s heyday—sale fliers for the old Levine’s department store, announcements about the Easter Bunny’s arrival—evidence that the place had once been a community in itself. We got excited when we talked to staff at the mall office and heard rumors that the mall might be purchased by a company who wanted to re-model it. We crossed our fingers and prayed for a reincarnation. There were shopping centers in better shape if we drove twenty or thirty minutes, but we wanted an everyday kind of mall—one we could disappear to after school.

But nothing happened in the years I lived in town. Instead, a few years ago the mall was gutted and remodeled. A nightclub overtook some of the space, and a sporting goods store appeared where the mall’s entrance used to be. It’s still jarring to drive by and not see the mall’s stone façade.

They broke ground for the Mall of America in 1989—the year *Prancer* was released—when the U.S. was still enjoying the robust economic swell of the late ‘80s. I was five when the gargantuan mall finally opened in 1992. Four years later, I saw Arnold Schwarzenegger running through its aisles in the movie *Jingle All the Way*. I heard mentions of it in my *American Girl* magazine, on TV shows, in Mary Kate and Ashley movies, and its proportions grew in my mind. It was a commercial mecca I wasn’t sure I’d ever see, but I dreamed of going to the mall, of wandering through its endless corridors. In my mind it didn’t just *have* an amusement park inside it—the entire place *was* one.

Last Spring I drove the nine hours to Minneapolis for the AWP conference, and after a day and a half of panels I couldn’t bear to sit through another, so I walked in the rain the few blocks to my hotel and pulled my hatchback onto the road. It was a quick zig down the highway, and I was there: The Mall of America. From outside it loomed grey and uninviting, but as I found a parking spot outside of L.L. Bean and walked past the giant hiking boot outside its doors, I got the strange feeling that I was about to cry. It was *just* a mall, but I couldn’t contain myself.

Entering through the mall’s Southwest corner I walked down the bright white aisles in the first zone of the mall with its glossy colorless walls and modern chandeliers—strings of refracting silver baubles raining from the lighted ceiling. I didn’t allow myself more than a glance in each storefront since I had miles (each lap of the mall is 0.57 miles and there are three full floors and a partial fourth) of mall to explore. After noticing two Claire’s storefronts stacked on top of one another—not the first store I’d seen duplicated on the mall directory—I watched

the walls change from white to silver. Now there were wide metallic columns that reminded me of the Y2K era—the sort of thing you’d see in the imagined futures of 1950s television shows. The floors were striped white and silver like a Victoria Secret bag. At one point I walked past a large sign: “Always Fresh. Always Exciting. Always New.” It took a moment to realize it was camouflaging an empty storefront. Although the Mall of America has a lower vacancy rate than most twenty-first century malls, it hasn’t been immune to decline.

I reached a clearing where I could look out over Nickelodeon Universe—the amusement park formerly known as Camp Snoopy—and eyed the roller coaster curiously. I might have bought a ticket if I hadn’t been alone. It seemed like I was wearing noise-cancelling headphones—as the amusement park seemed almost soundless. Maybe the mall seemed empty because it was a weekday, or perhaps it was always this listless. I like the way you can disappear into a group of people in some malls, but in the middle of the Mall of America, I felt like it was the rest of the world that had disappeared. I watched the hypnotizing movement of the mostly-empty Ferris wheel carts swinging past Dora’s face before moving along to a third section of the mall.

The silver decorations were again replaced with earthy hues of orange and green—an almost-pastel scheme that seemed definitively ‘90s. Then the squat orange tiles disappeared, and I walked on barren gray concrete as I entered a zone under construction. Whatever ceiling there had been was removed, and instead there was a thick layer of gray insulation—giant dust bunnies poised to hop downward. I couldn’t help thinking of asbestos. I paused near the construction and stared at the level below. An old man sat solemnly on a curved bench—a large S from above. He seemed content to people watch. I wondered if this was his only daily contact with humanity. The man’s image following me, I turned around—tracing my path back toward my car. On the

way out I passed a Chinese man in a page boy hat and tennis shoes, arms swinging vigorously. I smiled at an elderly couple, strolling hand in hand. On my way in, the people in the halls had seemed invisible, but now the shops became a backdrop to them. Even ten or twenty feet away—it was as if I could feel the heat from their bodies.

As I've grown older, I've begun to find solitude in malls. The summer after high school I wandered the outdoor mall between shifts at Chili's, taking a mental break from the constant bustle of the restaurant. When I spent a summer waiting tables at Cedar Point, my one day off a week was spent wandering the cool halls of the Sandusky mall, enjoying the relative silence outside of the theme park. And now, when the wind is frigid or water falls from the sky, I walk laps at Circle Centre mall a few blocks from my work in downtown Indianapolis. I walk in circles until I am joyfully erased among the bustle. The bold colors, the big sale signs, and the constant onslaught of people coming and going draw my eyes like rustling leaves on a stroll through the park, and for a short time, I'm able to walk away from the overflowing inbox and stacks of papers on my desk.

The first time I saw Circle Centre Mall—on a high school field trip—I was in awe of its commercial glimmer, of its corridors that floated above the street, and of its big windows and big views into the exciting city below. All the stores were new and expensive and tantalizingly out of reach. So when I first started working downtown a decade later, just a few blocks from the mall, it was surreal going to a place that had once seemed so remote. For the first few weeks, it still twinkled with promise as I re-discovered it, but eventually, it became familiar, even utilitarian—

a place to quickly grab lunch or pick a birthday gift on my lunch break. And over time I had to acknowledge that even this mall was in a state of decline.

On-line markets like Amazon have overtaken our lives, and most experts agree that the era of mid-level malls is nearing its ice age. Half the malls in America are predicted to close in the next two decades. Images of long-abandoned shopping malls have become internet clickbait, and the forecast is cloudy for any shopping center that doesn't cater to the One Percenters. I'm worried malls will go the way of payphones or floppy disks—that my kids will never understand why my generation played Mall Madness. I don't want to let go of the commercial era that inspired *Mall Rats* and *Jingle All the Way* or that epic chase scene through the mall in *Blues Brothers*. I don't want the commercial alchemy of malls to evaporate—for their tiny ecosystems to be destroyed.

But I cannot ignore the Circle Centre's decay as I walk past its wide windows that look out at blustering wind and icing rain-drops. I see it as I navigate between the irritating slow walkers and mid-walk stoppers in the not-wide-enough corridors of the mall. When the sidewalks are flanked by piles of gray slush I walk into the mall, past the woman who offers me a piece of the Chicken California at the sandwich shop and the man who thrusts a tooth pick with some malformed piece of bourbon chicken toward my face, and I see the increasingly vacant storefronts. They try to hide them by renting them out as advertising displays—but you can still sense the empty space behind the soulless mannequins.

I'm embarrassed by the sway this material entity has over me, bewildered by the mall's bittersweet grip. I was an overweight girl, am an overweight woman, and shopping makes me

anxious sometimes. I avoid certain stores, knowing they don't carry past size twelve; I feel nervous when I take items into a dressing room, my cheeks flushing as I wonder what the associate will assume when I put them on the left-over rack; will she think I was too fat for the discarded clothes? Will she be annoyed if I don't make a purchase? But being in a mall diminishes these problems. There is always an escape route when I'm getting too much attention from a sales associate or when the clothes are clearly not made to fit my body. There is another store to step into, or the option to completely disappear into the people streaming up and down the main corridor.

After all these years malls still bring me glee. When I see a set of escalators the girl inside me squeals with joy like I did on trips to JC Penny as a kid. I love walking out of a store with a new pair of shoes, and I get a high from finding eighty-dollar dress pants marked down to sixteen. And there is even something to be said about trying on those sixteen-dollar pants in a fitting room instead of negotiating with the UPS man. But perhaps the most alluring aspect of the mall is that I can imagine different possibilities, different versions of myself. If one store doesn't fit my mood, I simply walk to the next. When I am drowning in a sea of grey and black pant suits at work, I can go out and buy purple dress pants. I am still trying to be like the cool kids I lusted after as a kid. But that's what every mall is selling: the idea of transformation, the clichéd concept that I can wake up and put on a new set of clothes and become someone different. Underneath the mall's fluorescent lighting, we can imagine ourselves as people we like, and on our worst days, in lives we like.

To walk into a mall is to enter a place where real things cease to matter. I don't need new shoes or new blouses or six-dollar bottles of hand soap, but for a while I can let the bright colors and floral scents distract me from the things that pollute my life. There's something valuable in

the mall's utter lack of significance—in its perfectly arbitrary nature. And even when I am annoyed by sales people or get stuck behind dawdling ladies when I'm in a rush, I love knowing there are other people in the mall, wandering in circles around the same corridors, searching for something—perhaps the very same thing.

If I seem contradictory, it's because malls are contradictory—because our very lives are. The mall offers both attention and erasure; we can disappear among the hallway throngs or we can step into a shop and be waited on; we can buy clothes to disguise our flaws or accentuate our inner selves. The mall embodies the human struggle between wanting to stand out and wanting to fit in—of wanting community but being afraid people will not accept you. The mall embodies this tension between wanting to be seen and unseen.

Over the past year, the eco-system of the mall has changed. A dozen or so stores have left Circle Centre. The Gap sold all its shelving and left behind empty white walls. I picked up twenty cards for a dollar when American Greetings was selling off the last of its stock. The Yankee Candle a few doors down disappeared, too. Other stores' departures I have already forgotten. Some of the storefronts have become pop-up shops, there only for days or weeks at a time—the mall's attempt to adapt.

I hope there is still a mall to walk through in twenty years. I don't want to lose the mall because losing the mall is losing its people—losing the faces that change but the feeling that doesn't. In a world where lives are increasingly lived online, malls are places where people connect in person—no matter how small the intersections are. There is something to be said for the small smiles as you pass by a stranger—for knowing the t-shirt you're handling might have been touched by someone only minutes before—for unexpected compliments from store clerks

on a good hair day. And in the end, my fear for malls is fear for humanity. My hope for malls is hope for humanity.

It's been a year since I finally entered through Mall of America's hallowed automatic doors, and I'm still thinking about it—a place of splendor that might be tiptoeing toward irrelevancy. I am still thinking of the section that was being renovated—how vulnerable it was, innards left open to the air, to thousands of people each day. I think of the signs that flanked the torn-open hallways: “Excuse us while we redefine our style.” I think of malls as living, breathing things—organisms like us who are waiting for another day, another year, another visitor. I hope the fate of Maple Lane Mall is not a shared fate—that I won't have to haunt the frames of old films to find the bustling communities that once existed in the flesh.

The Lift Hill Summer

You could only hear the lyrics “We live to ride, we ride to live” so many times before you lost the will to live; that’s one thing I learned the summer I turned twenty. When I left home to work in Ohio that summer, the worst things I’d done were these: 1. Sneaking a bottle of Arbor Mist into my boyfriend’s dorm room for our six-month anniversary. 2. Platonic skinny dipping in Lake Michigan with my best friend and two other girls. 3. Drinking at high school parties when I was seventeen, where I was watched like a creature in a zoo—miss prissy pants outside her natural habitat. But these were small pinpoints on a life that was otherwise clean, a life filled with mission trips, volunteering, and competing on the Spell Bowl team. I had picked a party school for college and hadn’t gone to any parties. But I was about to.

That summer, I lived in cheap housing for employees at Cedar Point amusement park, near the coast of Lake Erie. I worked long hours carting six-dollar domestics across the Red Garter Saloon in plastic cups, occasionally serving a taco salad topped with “vegetable protein,” more often balancing buckets of popcorn and jumbo hot dogs in between tightly spaced wooden tables at show time. And the show: it destroyed me. After hearing it thirty-two times the first week, I knew all the lyrics to each “Rockin’ Country” hit. The next week, I could perform the choreography. A month in, my body inadvertently moved with the music while I poured beers behind the bar. I grew tired of the high-pitched screeching of the male lead. I wanted to punch the blond girl with the high pony because of the way a terrible wrinkle formed above her nose and between her eyes when she sang, making her look like some species from an episode of Star Trek. I wanted to burn the girls’ multi-colored, sequin-drenched duster jackets in an old barrel out back. I was always praying for Tuesday, the only day the performers had off when my ears

had a break from the twangy, country-rock hits I had despised even before their endless journeys in and out my ear holes.

But between shows my co-workers and I suffered through another layer of hell. The saloon had this mass of clunker televisions mounted above the stage, and when it wasn't show time, which meant every other hour of the day, the boxes played a loop of approximately twelve music videos. Over and over. *If I were Invisible*, Clay Aiken. *My Lovin' (You're Never Gonna Get it)*, En Vogue. *She's so High*, Tal Bachman. *Have a Little Faith In Me*, Mandy Moore. I've tried to erase the rest from memory, but they're still there. At the end of the day, I'd trudge back to the lot where I could catch an old school bus back to the employee housing. It was circled by tall barb-wire fences, and having to check in with an employee ID every night made me feel like an inmate walking back to my sixteen-person apartment.

We were squeezed two or three to a room in what was only built to house ten or twelve. At the start of the summer, I arrived with a cardboard box stuffed with canned food and a carry-on suitcase. Everyone called the girl I roomed with Sugar Mama, perhaps out of irony, as her face was hard, bearing an infinite scowl each time I entered the room. I barely spoke to her, and her disdain for me was immediate. I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because I was a privileged white girl in the midst of thirteen black women, but I didn't feel privileged. I felt average, unsure, and out of place. I could count the black people I knew from my small town on one hand, but most of the women I lived with were from the 313 (Detroit, as I would learn) which seemed like a different world rather than a different area code. There were a couple other white women, too, but not anyone like my friends back home. One wore a do-rag. The other was middle-aged with long, wavy, dyed-red hair and bulgy eyes who read Tarot cards and often came into the small, shared living room crying because she'd had a vision of the future that had bested her. I'm

sure Sugar Mama's hostility wasn't just saved for me, but her anger was a constant reminder that I was the minority, and I was alone.

But I dug in and tried to make myself feel at home. When one of the ladies eyed my straightening iron, I left it on the bathroom counter as a peace offering. I tried to make friends with the girls in my apartment, with the co-workers who danced behind the bar with me. No one from my life outside Ohio had wanted me to spend my summer away, but for once I wasn't doing what everyone else wanted. My mother said I would waste the money I earned and come home penniless; she wanted me to stay home and return to the job I had waiting for me at Chili's. But there I had a half-hour drive to a part-time job that paid minimum wage; I had faith that working fulltime in Ohio would fill my pockets, even though I'd be hours away from my family, from my friends, and from my serious boyfriend.

Josiah was the stereotypical doting boyfriend. He bought me roses on Valentine's day and wine on our anniversary. He made me feel pretty, and was always planning happy little surprises. He loved his mother, Jesus, and me; even my parents adored him. And although he didn't try to stop me from leaving for the summer, I knew he wasn't thrilled. But I didn't want the summer to be about us. I couldn't have put a word to my desire then, but I wanted time away from myself—a break from a past filled with Sunday School, straight As and the expectation I would continue my reign as an over-achieving goody two shoes. I had spent 18 years being who my parents' wanted, and then I'd jumped into a relationship with similar expectations before college classes started. I needed to see who I was away from my family, my too-perfect boyfriend, and my spotless reputation. I thought maybe I could find myself in an apartment where nobody knew me.

It was impossible to know anyone in the apartment well. We worked in different places, some as ride operators, others working games, some in food service, like me. We were working fifty or sixty hours a week, but there were a few roommates I was glad to see when I walked into the dingy living room after twelve hours of listening to the same country songs endlessly. Some nights the horrible hum of country music in my head was replaced with the soft voice of my favorite roommate, the woman we all called Mama. It might have been confusing living with both a Sugar Mama and Mama, if it hadn't been so easy to tell the difference. Mama's kindness was in direct proportion to Sugar Mama's lack of it. Her protruding belly grew ripe with child as the summer progressed, and her soft eyes were a reminder that she was the mother in our house. She kept me from strangling Sugar Mama when she blared the TV when I was trying to sleep. She pulled girls apart when they started fights in the hallway over missing shampoo or dirty bathrooms. She implemented cleaning day and gave us chores as we walked through the door at night, like sweeping the graying linoleum tiles, or wiping off the yellow bathroom counters. Nobody minded her rules because keeping mama happy kept the house in line.

One night I heard the ladies in the common room making plans to go to a foam party. I shuffled around our apartment hoping for an invitation, until Mama asked if I wanted to go. I had just turned twenty, which was old enough to serve beer in Ohio, but not old enough to drink it. My eyes brightened at the idea of going to a club, even if it was an 18-and-over place. I retrieved my swimsuit and a pair of shorts from my suitcase and was dressed before the news had made it to the back of the apartment. Josiah called while I waited on the others. I told him about the foam party, and he didn't want me to go. But I had already committed; I hung up angry and refused to change my plans.

But maybe Josiah was omniscient. It wasn't just the idea of me dancing in a swimsuit that made him nervous—it was this morphing version of me. He had signed on for feeding ducks and studying together at the library. He hadn't signed on to date a party girl. He wanted to hold onto the saccharin version of me he'd believed I was—who even I still believed I was.

We all squeezed into a van and it drove us away from the lake and toward the part of town that wasn't bright and shiny and covered in little lights like the giant midway where we worked. We drove to some non-descript brick building in a dim part of town. If I hadn't been in a group, I'd have been nervous. I could barely see in front of me as we walked in, and as my eyes tried to adjust to the dark I could feel hands brushing my ass as I walked through the crowd. This was the summer of “making it rain” and my eyes increased in size as several men started throwing bills into the crowd and people started diving toward them. I watched as a garden of butts bloomed toward the ceiling. I'd thought “making it rain” was folklore—a thing that happened with rich rappers in music videos—but the twenties floating past me were evidence of the contrary.

I danced in the crowds, feeling appreciative hands slide along the curves of my body. There was some sort of machine squirting a constant stream of bath bubbles into the crowd. It was dark and wet, and my suit was quickly covered in thick foam, but I danced on, trying to move in ways I never had before, feeling muscles I never knew existed as my thighs dipped my body toward the ground. I was liberated by the darkness. When we piled into the van to drive home, there was no place on me the foam hadn't touched. I smelled like cheap hand soap and my thighs burned, but I wasn't tired. My roommates were squeezed next to me in the seats like old friends, and I was buzzing with joy.

On the Fourth of July, the park was open late, til midnight, and fireworks erupted to close the day. My co-workers and I were lucky, because the saloon's liquor license only allowed us to sell beer until a certain hour. Once we stopped selling, it emptied quickly. We finished early and headed off to party at one of the guy's houses. I was still new to drinking, but I wanted to fit in. I didn't call Josiah to ask his opinion this time; I didn't want his voice—or anyone else's—in my head.

There was a bowl of fruit on the table, and after I ate a few pieces I realized it didn't taste right. There was something off. "There's vodka in the fruit!" my friend Jessica hooted while I chewed on a strawberry. I just smiled. It was delicious, and I couldn't stop grabbing more from the bowl. Watermelon. Grapes. Cantaloupe. All with this delicious new aftertaste. When the liquor started to run low we went to a gas station. I don't remember who drove, or if we even drove at all. Maybe we walked down the street, but we came back with a bottle of Wild Irish Rose. It was bright green, the color of luck, some apple-flavored shit. It was the type of "wine" bums and underage kids drank. I remember drinking and dancing, and finishing off the bowl of fruit, but not much else.

The next day, I woke up with the worst headache of my life, my stomach gurgling like a science fair volcano. My brother and I had made plans to ride coasters all day. When I'd gotten a job at Cedar Point, he'd jumped on the wagon, getting a job working ride photo, but our conflicting hours meant we didn't see much of one another. I had been excited to spend the day with my little brother, until I woke up. I swallowed a few Tylenol, chugged as much water as I could. I made it through the first few rides, and thought that perhaps the worst was behind me. I got a custard cone, and we got in line for an easy coaster, the Bluestreak. The wooden ride was nothing compared to the mammoth metal ones with their twists and loops and inclines reaching

toward insanity, so I thought I'd be okay. I made it through the coaster without erupting, but just barely. I decided I had to tell my brother that I felt awful, but first, I sat down on a park bench, turned to my left and heaved all the half-digested fruit onto the warm concrete. We moved to a bench away from the vomit and I nervously told my brother about my night. He just laughed, and I exhaled, grateful for his lack of judgment. It took a while, but eventually my stomach settled, and we enjoyed the rest of the day, spending hours catching up in the ride cues. My brother's non-reaction felt like blessed permission to keep doing what I wanted.

When my very Christian best friend came to visit in the middle of the summer I told her the secrets of the park: How employees were supposed to tell people to put their cigarettes out if we saw them, even if we weren't on the clock. How if I got to the park early I could ride coasters before it opened and then change in a bathroom before my shift. How sometimes the waiters at the other saloon wouldn't come in and I'd have to haul ass down to their bar for the day. How once, at the Red Garter Saloon everyone had been late, and I had handled a lunch rush on my own, making bank when people saw how fast I was running around. I showed her my perfectly-memorized show choreography. I even told her how Clay Aiken had come to the park, and that my little brother had been in charge of deleting his ride photo so fans didn't try to buy it. But there were things omitted. I don't remember telling her about the nights out. I didn't tell her about the Fourth of July and the discovery of vodka fruit. When Josiah visited, my gift for omission returned. We waited in lines all day, the secrets balancing precariously on my lips even after the park closed.

Most of my days off were spent like that, waiting in lines. I would splurge on a frozen custard swirl cone, walking through the park alone, letting the custard melt on my tongue into warm, sugary milk. By the end of summer, I had tank top tan lines from walking the park, and

my roommates asked me with brows raised if I was mixed because my skin had grown so dark. Along with the tan, I'd developed a sense of peace while standing in the cue. When you're in an amusement park for just a day, there's pressure to ride as much as you can, to experience every flip and inversion and loop de loop, but the coasters, as much as I loved them, had become familiar. Prior summers I had waited anxiously to get on Millenium Force, the giant, blue beast with a steep, speeding lift hill. It was the Mecca to which I must go, the reason for each trip. But now, standing in line felt like standing in my own backyard. I knew the feel of the cool metal rails gripped in my hands. I looked forward to the respite from the sun beneath the shaded spots. My calves felt the familiar strain as I walked the ramp up to the coaster, the sign I was minutes away from another flight through the air, from the wind squeezing between my fingertips. And I didn't care about being a single rider. I didn't mind going it alone. I no longer felt like I needed to rush to any destination. I had learned that there is a certain kind of peace in waiting.

Mama was the first to leave that summer, her due date nearing. We threw her a baby shower in a cluster of picnic tables outside our apartment. I came home to my roommates frying chicken wings in an industrial-sized pan; piles of cakes and cookies appeared from nowhere. We rolled out toilet paper to the length we thought her belly was, and I felt embarrassed for her and me when mine was impossibly long. When all the presents were given, all the food eaten, she packed up her things and left. I didn't know if she had a man she was going back to, but I knew she was the kind of woman who would be okay without one—that she wouldn't let anyone else direct her plans. When I think of Mama now, I feel the warmth of someone's arms around me, though I don't know if we ever even touched. I wanted to be like Mama; I didn't want to depend on anyone else—to be anyone besides my true self.

When I left a few weeks later, my bank statement showed a balance of seven grand, and I'd proven my mother wrong. But money was just a bonus. I had spent the season waiting tables, waiting in lines, waiting to use the bathroom in my crowded apartment. But more than anything, I'd been waiting for *my* life to start, and without my realizing, it had. I had left for the summer terrified, and I came home feeling brave. I had done the unexpected and escaped the constant loop of songs I'd been stuck in.

When I went back to school I felt different. I was no longer an understudy to my own life. I said what I wanted, I questioned things, I showed less judgment, and I even skipped class once in a while. I could be revised, re-programmed, re-envisioned, as many times as I needed. Everyone's expectations were only potential storylines; there were points in my plot that only I could revise.

A few months later, Josiah and I both grabbed our laptops and, after exchanging one last look, changed our Facebook statuses to single. It was less a clean break from him, more a severing from a life where I wasn't the author. I'd deliberated for months whether I could be the person he wanted—if I had ever been that person—but in the end the conversation had been painless.

"Do you know what I'm going to say?" I had asked.

"Yes, I think so," he'd replied.

And we had sat in silence for a few minutes, letting this new truth settle between us.

Crystal

The first time I saw her was from behind: short black hair that stopped at the nape of a neck, a strong but lean back, the pressed behind of a pair of men's slacks. When she turned around, it took a moment to take in breasts and cheekbones and a face that would have been pretty if it weren't so intense—if she weren't trying to conceal her femininity.

I knew lots of lesbians from college, but Crystal wasn't like any of them; she wore her sexuality like a uniform, was the ladies' man of lesbians. You didn't need gaydar to figure out who she wanted; it was evident in her eyes—in the way they seemed darker when some pretty girl sat in her section. You could hear it when her voice—soft, scratchy, and a higher pitch than you'd expect—got deeper and slicker when she talked to certain women. She had a hint of an accent I could never quite place, and certain words sounded alien from her lips. You would catch her big, white-toothed grin—always frozen at the point just before laughter. She never wore dresses, and her black hair was always in some variation of a buzz, the barber cutting it to a one on the sides. She had big diamonds in both ears and an eyebrow ring. She wore men's slacks or black Carhart pants. When she wasn't wearing a fiesta-colored work shirt she had on a black tee or a white, ribbed tank.

When I met Crystal I didn't expect we'd be friends; I didn't expect to wonder if I could love her or be loved by her. She scared me a little. She was hard and bright where I was soft and subdued. We seemed like different breeds: I was Midwestern middle class—a goody-goody white girl, an intellectual snob who had just finished college. Crystal was Mexican, by way of Texas, a troublemaker who I wasn't sure finished high school. I had spent my youth winning

spelling bees, checking out library books, and singing in the church choir. She had spent hers playing basketball and experimenting with booze, pot and other girls.

If I had graduated in a better economy, if I had moved to a different town, if I had been anywhere else, we would have missed each other, but thanks to the shitty economy of 2009, two lines that should have been parallel intersected, and Crystal and I ended up waiting tables together in the same mediocre Mexican restaurant.

I was shy around new people, so it took a few weeks before my co-workers at the restaurant realized I was old enough to drink, but once they did, I always got invited somewhere after hours. One night we went out to the local gay bar. We drank. We danced. We played countless songs—from Beyonce to Gaga to Jason Derulo—on the jukebox. Eventually all my co-workers left, until it was just Crystal and I on the bar's small, dark stage, grinding to Lady Gaga. Everyone else had someone or something to go home to, but the two of us kept dancing, her hands on my hips, my ass, anywhere she wanted. I liked the way her eyes lit up when she looked at me—when she touched me. I found myself inhaling the clean smell of her men's cologne. I knew she had a girlfriend, and it made me feel both safe and rebellious being so close to her.

Within a few weeks I had become a regular at the bar because Crystal always enticed me along. Walking into Zooleggers, it didn't look like much more than a hallway. It was one long room with a bar stretching along the right half, a few tables and a small stage at one end. A room off the side held a single pool table. The tables were old and wobbly—the chairs mismatched relics collected from other long-closed establishments. The walls were simply painted black and decorated with signs for vodka. If I hadn't known the clientele I might've expected middle-aged Harley drivers and blue collar, pack-a-day types, but most weekends there was an interesting array of regulars: the lesbian couple who always came with dyed hair and anime t-shirts, the

Southern boy who sang Grease songs on karaoke night, and the gay man who came around with his wife and made sure everyone knew they only got married for the tax break (wink, wink, boys, he's available). The owner was a thin, middle-aged man who might have been considered a twink in younger days; on weekends he would don a sequined dress and host the drag show. Everyone there seemed secure in themselves, and I soaked in that feeling. Crystal and I became part of the bar family. I didn't want to admit it, but I needed my nights with her. Trying not to dwell on my personal failures, I drew power from her inexplicable belief in me. I took her affection, her admiration, and the endless pitchers of beer she sat down in front of me. In return I listened to her stories—about a life she'd had before I knew her.

Once in a while—only when she was both drunk and tired—she would tell me about the son she'd left behind with her ex-girlfriend, a road-trip away where she'd grown up. I didn't understand all the details, but Crystal had come to Indiana to reunite with her sister, who she hadn't seen for years. I wasn't sure why she hadn't gone back to her life in Texas. When she did talk about her son, she would pull out a wrinkled photo from her wallet. He looked like her, even at age seven or eight. They both had buzzed hair that highlighted the similarities in their faces.

Most nights Crystal was drunk or high, but she still somehow paid her rent on time. She always made her work shifts in freshly laundered and pressed clothes. She paid rent for her sister—a single mother—to make sure she had a roof over her head. She was always offering food or drinks or anything she could let go of. If she invited you over to her apartment, she would go straight to the fridge.

“You want eggs?” she'd ask.

“That's okay, I'm alright.”

“I’ve got chicken nuggets, too” she’d say sifting through the freezer. “I’ll go ahead and make something.”

Before you could stop her she’d have eggs in a pan, corn tortillas warming next to them. Her natural state was one of giving, and it wasn’t only food and cervezas. To me, she offered herself, on many nights. In the quiet hours before Zooleggers closed, she would say, “Laura, I love you,” running one hand softly down my arm. I was scared how attracted to her I was, but I kept refusing her—she had a girlfriend after all.

A red-head from the next town over, her girlfriend was about my age, but a little younger and in better shape. And some nights, Katie—the girlfriend—would come out with us. And the problem was that *I liked* her. She was more like me than she was like Crystal. When the two of them fought—which was most nights—I silently sided with Katie. I could see myself in her place; the things that made her angry with Crystal were the things that kept me at arm’s length. Dumb inebriated decisions. And so I let Katie and Crystal maintain their on-again, off-again tango. When they were off, Crystal and I would go out, and her eyes would land on me more often. Her lips would lie about how pretty I was, and I would pretend I wasn’t desperate to hear her words.

Even at my heaviest—when the scale leveled out toward two forty—she still devoured me with her eyes. She still danced along the curves of my body as if I were the sexiest woman in the room. I wrapped my arms around her strong shoulders thankful for the obstacles between us; I was safe from being completely consumed by her.

Once, while shopping with both her and Katie, I fingered a teal tank top with intricate beadwork.

“Go try it on,” Crystal said. I went obediently into a dressing room.

“Oh, Laura, it looks so good on you,” she said as I walked out. Her eyebrows said more than her words.

“It’s okay,” I said, noting Katie watching us. “But, I don’t need it.”

“No, you look so good. I’m buying it for you.” At this point arguing was futile; she would sell me somehow. I tried not to look Katie in the eyes as Crystal bought me the top; this was not the first or last time I’d avoid her stare.

On karaoke nights Crystal would talk about the chills she got when I sang *Torn*, even though I was never as good as Natalie Imbruglia. And though I knew she was technically taken, I let her be my champion; I wanted her to love me in the ways I couldn’t love myself, even if I wouldn’t reciprocate.

I had all sorts of ways to turn her down. When she and Katie were on, I reminded her she had a girlfriend. When they were off, I told her I liked guys. I said her being a woman was insurmountable—even though I wasn’t sure how true that was. The real issue was that Crystal was wild in ways I wasn’t. Some part of me knew I could fall for her, but I knew it would end in disaster. I would always want to change her, and I worried she would change me. I kept her close enough to make me feel wanted but not close enough to get my heart broken—not close enough to break her heart. I believed I held that power.

One night, both drunk past the point of driving, we slept in her bed, and I worried she would think it was more than what it was. I was anxious I would wake with her arms around me and like it too much. On another night, when the beer pitchers were fuller than expected, I gave in, and we kissed ferociously in the booth at Zooleggers. I told her it was a mistake, kissing her like that. I wanted to be as carefree as Crystal, but I wasn’t. I thought past the next beer, the next high.

But if she had money she hadn't already spent on beer, she would buy weed, and she was a great bartender so she usually had dough. She could have outsold the Wolf of Wallstreet if she'd tried. She always had funds for blunts and Bud Light but never for car repairs—so I drove us around a lot of the time. One night we went into Zooleggers, and a few drinks later she headed out to my car to get her weed. I followed her, pissed she'd leave drugs inside my vehicle. I would drink until the cows came home, but I stayed away from drugs. As much as I wanted not to care, my nature was to be cautious, and I didn't want a record. I'd seen my brothers fuck around with drugs and had decided not to repeat their mistakes, so I was annoyed before I even saw where she'd left the blunt.

When we got to my old Grand Marquis, I saw it sitting on the console, the streetlights making it practically glow from inside. It was one thing to leave weed in my car; it was another to leave it in plain sight. I'd been trying to ignore the dumb things Crystal did; I'd been telling myself I was uptight, but I couldn't pretend anymore. I hated that she didn't think things through—how she was stuck in the perpetual now when I needed her to think more than three hours ahead. And I hated how close I was to giving into her despite my misgivings. So when I saw the blunt, I lost it. For once, my anger flared past my buzz.

“Are you a fucking idiot!” I yelled. “You could've at least put it in the glove box, or inside of the Yoda.” I pointed to the happy meal toy hanging from my rearview mirror—a hollowed out character which opened in the back.

“You don't fucking *think*, Crystal. This is *my* car. I'm the one who would get in trouble.”

“Laura,” she said, her voice getting slick, “It's not a big deal.”

Crystal tried to charm her way out, but for once it didn't work. Her eyes grew serious when I kept yelling. She mouthed the word "sorry" but I didn't care. I was tired of her bullshit, her goddamned apathy. It's taken me years to realize I was yelling at myself, too—the part of myself that had stopped giving a shit about my life. I had latched onto Crystal because she'd made me feel valuable when I'd felt like a failure, but I'd gotten so entwined in her careless world that I'd forgotten I had ambition once. I had always seen myself as better than her. Once, she and I had seemed so different, but on the dark street outside the bar, we stood in the same shadow.

A few months after our blow out, I totaled my car on the interstate. I was air-lifted to the hospital, and my mother called my job to tell them I wouldn't be in. During the four days I spent at the hospital in Indianapolis—an hour drive or more from most of the people I knew—Crystal was one of only a couple friends who visited. She came the morning after my crash, her face red from crying.

"I was so scared," she said, not wanting to look me in the eyes. "They told me you got in an accident, but I didn't know if you were okay..." I grabbed her hand. I told her it was okay—that I was okay. My mother eyed us from the hall, trying to gauge who Crystal was and why she looked on the verge of tears. I am still trying to gauge who Crystal was to me.

I think it's a lie when people say they love each other equally. Maybe I'm a pessimist, but I always think there is one person whose love weighs more—one person whose hurt would bury the other person's if a relationship failed. With Crystal, I always believed I held the power; I thought I was protecting her from heartbreak, but I'm not so sure anymore.

I won't bore you with the details of how our lives unraveled, but inevitably, they did. I wish I could explain how it felt to know everything about her but still know nothing at all. I

could sense when she was about to head up and get another pitcher of beer, or when she was about to appraise me with her starving eyes. I knew the restless look on her face when she was about to head outside to toke up. I knew what songs to sing at karaoke to make her say “Laura, you gave me goosebumps!” I could predict all those moments so easily, but I couldn’t predict that I would lose her. I didn’t imagine our lives would become so disparate—as though she and I had never existed in the same place—or even the same time together.

I lost her phone number ages ago, and now all I know of her is a Facebook page. She’s back in Texas now. She has a new baby and a new girlfriend, and last thing I knew, she was sober. I see an occasional photo posted of her and *both* her sons. Sometimes I think of her and my heart feels big in my chest. I want her to be okay. I want her to know I loved her even though she drove me crazy.

Lately my life has begun to feel predictable—like the corners are folded too precisely. I rebel against growing up by going out and drinking too much—by reliving the way I was that year with Crystal. I don’t want to be the naïve girl I was before we met; I want her wildness in every single cell of me. I never expected that Crystal would matter, but now I don’t want to lose the pieces of her I carry. Sometimes I feel her flicker within me: when I drink a bottle of Bud Light at a bar or look a second time at a girl whose hair is buzzed short. I can hear the strange inflection when she spoke. I can still hear the way she said my name, though I cannot replicate it aloud; the vowels fell from her mouth in a way only she could say it.

Love in Revision

I made my brother stub out his cigarette before he got in the car. It was Saturday, and Dan and I drove to the Indianapolis Museum of Art. We walked through its halls together, silent, aside from Dan's occasional jokes at phallic paintings. In the contemporary section he disappeared while I stood engrossed, looking at the *Mobius Ship* sculpture, the ship—like one you'd find inside a bottle, but much too large to fit in one—slowly curved its way into an unnatural circle. I imagined the circular ship in motion, it turning like a wheel, sails in and out of the water like an accelerated version of the sun disappearing and reappearing on the horizon. Without its invisible fishing line levitation, the sculpture would topple to its side and float like a life preserver, but that ship didn't appear to obey the laws of physics. When I found my brother again he was standing on the *Floor*, a clear platform supported by thousands of polyurethane men, their tiny arms holding up the glass. He was half bent, looking down at the tiny figures. They reminded me of the army men he meticulously arranged in formations atop sheets of plywood as a kid. When I stepped toward the platform, he stopped me. "Get off of them, they can't take your weight!" he said with a snicker. I called him an ass.

On the way back we stopped for burritos. Between bites of steak in verde sauce he asked me about life. It was boring talk. Work. School. He laughed when I told him how much I loved my classes, teased me about being the nerd in the family. I asked him if he had a new girlfriend, when he was going back to school. A few hours later, we walked toward his old Volvo. He hugged me tight, saying, "See you later, sis," and hopped in the car. When he left, I noticed his cigarettes butts lodged between cracks in the concrete of my back patio.

Except that's not true. There are details cobbled together from real events, but the relationship I write is a lie—a luke-warm fiction brighter than the truth. We are not the kind of siblings who do things one on one. We don't talk on the phone. We don't go out for burritos. Our rare hugs are loose, and awkward, and never held longer than a breath. The truth is that addiction took my brother, left instead a changeling unskilled at mimicry. Our relationship has left the realm of reality and moved instead onto the page. When I try to write the truth, words become fiction instead—stories where he is the brother who would have existed without drugs. Paragraphs where I pretend I am okay with my brother being gone. And so I have been writing this essay, and the ones that came before it, for years, and each time I re-read this imagined day with my brother the lie grows, builds itself into something closer to a memory.

The truth is that I teeter between wanting our relationship to become real and knowing a real relationship could devastate me. Because I'm afraid he will die. Some sick part of me *knows* he will die—is already thinking of how I will talk of him when he's gone. Instead of working on our relationship in real life, I try to fix it on the page; I have been writing a world where he and I can exist. I've created an atmosphere unpolluted by the expectation of apology or forgiveness—a place where I don't have to face my fear.

Dan is the second of five of us. My sister, Carolyn is the responsible oldest child, a maternal figure I wasn't embarrassed of, who drove me into Canada to see Shakespeare plays with gratuitous nudity when I was sixteen. Joe was the stereotypical middle child who whined and cursed, never knowing what he wanted until he had a son; he knew wanted to be a father. Then came me, the goody-goody always afraid of letting people down. And lastly Thom, the quiet boy who played board games by himself, who loves math and watching bad movies and cats.

Dan was always in periphery. My other brothers were closer in age—they were the ones I fought with, danced with, built snow forts and made hot cocoa in the kitchen with. Most of my memories of Dan are re-created from old photographs in my mother's closet. There are T-ball pictures from summers I am too young to remember. A trip to Disney World when I was still an infant. Mostly, I picture him in the grass, climbing trees, holding onto things that squirmed, running along streams with a bug net trying to catch things that fluttered faster than his growing feet. He was a timid smile and blue-grey eyes engulfed in big glasses.

I do remember that at one point, he was a magician—he even performed at my sixth birthday party. I can see his twelve-year-old hands pulling scarves from hats, dressed in a black and white blazer and his coke-bottle glasses. He collected insects, placing crane flies or swallowtail butterflies in jars of ethyl alcohol until their minute limbs froze in place, and then delicately pinning them to the backing of his glass-topped bug box. But in high school he developed a casual coolness—an “I don't care” attitude personified in his ability to wear old-man slacks he bought at Goodwill and grow his wavy, brown hair long. Girls started liking him, his every eccentricity. His style evolved into vintage puma jackets, work boots, and unkempt dreads that sagged from his head.

Dan didn't scare bullies away or threaten boys I dated. He teased me about my weight. He sucked cigarettes defiantly on the sidewalk across from school. He stayed in his basement bedroom listening to Nirvana and went to Smashing Pumpkin shows with his friends. He tore pages from magazines to make intricate collages of overlapping devils and angels and death-white swans. One summer he tried to convince me I'd look great with dreads, and I thought about it, because to me, my big brother was still cool. I colored within the lines while he painted

around in sweeping strokes of black and grey. I wanted to grasp the freedom in his recklessness—at least until recklessness ruined everything.

Sometime between starting high school, flunking out of college, and starting a moderately successful job as a tattoo artist, Dan found heroin. I knew he smoked cigarettes and weed, but I'd been able to ignore his drug problem until it crashed into sight. Dan was high and driving with a suspended license when he drove my '87 Cadillac into a tree. It was my first car—the one I drove around lovingly calling my “pimp mobile”—and when my brother totaled it I spent the next year borrowing my parent's wood-paneled mini-van instead. I was seventeen and newly car-less, and the vision I'd had of my brother eroded. He was a selfish, stupid life ruiner. I heard the frantic whispers between him and my parents. *Suspended license. Drugs. High as a kite. OWI. Court Date.* I was old enough to piece things together, but my parents tried to sugarcoat things. They didn't say, “Your brother is a heroin addict” or “We're using our savings to get your brother out of debt.” They didn't acknowledge the point on our family timeline that now said, “Dan hits rock bottom and pulls everyone down with him.”

So what do you do when you're seventeen and find out your brother is a heroin addict? You pretend nothing has happened. You tell friends your brother crashed your car, but not why. You go to three different churches to avoid coming home. You pray. You try to imagine ways to help but come up with nothing. You realize you cannot control your brother, or his actions, or heroin. You cry at night but smile during the day. You hold tight to the image of your brother with thick glasses and a thin wooden wand.

I thought if I didn't talk about his addiction it would disappear. I was ashamed of my brother. I was the kid who got straight A's and sang in church and didn't get invited to cool

parties because nobody thought I would drink. And they were right; I'd never smoked a cigarette, had never tasted liquor. Being child number four didn't come with a lot of attention, so I had been perfect so people would pay attention. But I felt like Dan's mistakes were mine, that his misdeeds would tarnish my reputation. I wondered if the dark thing lurking inside him would make its home in me.

A few years later, while I was away at college, Dan stumbled into his living room to find his roommate's body on the floor. An overdose. When my mother told me, I couldn't stop thinking about it. His name was Matt, and he had been a person, before drugs made him only a body. I could picture him sitting in my parents' living room the summer before, waiting for my brother to change clothes. He was legally blind, and his pupils were always unsure of which blurry place to land. Mostly, I remember that Matt talked to me. Most of my brother's friends were too cool to talk to me, but he had, so I remembered fondly his perpetually confused eyes and dark hair. I missed him more than I should have missed a person I hardly knew. I started steeling myself for my brother's demise.

I wasn't in town when Dan found Matt's body, but I heard he called the coroner first. He didn't think about 911 or an ambulance or the fact that people don't call the coroner and say, "I've got a body that needs picked up" unless they're employed by a hospital or a police station. They questioned him for hours. I picture my brother rigid in front of the body, breath knocked from him momentarily. I imagine his work boots stuck to cheap carpet as if glued. He stares with watery grey eyes for too long before reaching for his phone.

I hoped seeing stiff-fingered death inches from his toes would change things, and for a while it seemed like it had. He would drive an hour to Gary each day, where a clinic would give

him doses of Methadone instead of heroin. As he weened himself off drugs, his fingers grew thicker and he had to buy new pants. His brow furrowed in confusion less often. But though he switched from heroin to methadone he still wasn't sober. When he stopped going to the clinic the brother I'd known pre-drugs didn't return; he was still a flurry of a person I couldn't grasp. He said he was clean, and I wanted to trust him, but doubt held tight like a zebra mussel.

A few summers ago, I went to a wedding blocks from Dan's place. In the break between the ceremony and reception, my fiancé and I walked over to his house to say hello. It was the house he bought before his downfall—back when he had a job and a paycheck and credit cards to help hide his mounting debts—the house my parents have continued paying the mortgage on. When I stepped onto his porch a stranger was outside, tinkering with an old lawnmower, but he said Dan was inside. There were always people I didn't know at Dan's house—a revolving door of vagabonds who made me nervous. I knocked once. Waited. I knocked again. Waited. As we were about to leave, the door cracked open and Dan stared out with surprised red eyes, pushing greasy brown hair from his puffy face.

“Hey,” he said, “What are you doing here?”

“We were over there for a wedding so I thought I'd stop by.” My voice got quieter as I spoke. He looked back inside the house, pulling the door shut behind him.

“Well, I've got some people over right now...”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.”

He said he'd see me the next month and we eyeballed each other silently for a moment before he closed the door. Why couldn't I come in? Who was inside? I tried to fabricate a good explanation, but my mind wouldn't cooperate; if he didn't have anything to hide, he would've let me in. I wanted to karate chop the door down and scream, "What kind of piece of shit brother are you?" but I kept it closed. I didn't want to see whatever the fuck was happening inside—didn't want that image to be real inside of me. I wanted to un-see his retreat back into the house—a confirmation he was doing drugs, that the brother I wanted would never return. I wanted to kick trees and cars and already crumbling cement staircases. But I walked away. I walked away from the contradictions—the homogenized mixture of anger and love. We walked back to the wedding, and I went back to pretending like I didn't hurt.

When I was twenty-one, an undergraduate exploring memoir for the first time, I wrote that I'd forgiven my brother. But it has been eight years, and I can tell you I simply wanted an ending with closure. There is a difference between the desire to forgive and the act of forgiving. Every word written about him is an attempt to forgive, but it's hard to absolve someone who is still hurting you. Perhaps I cannot forgive because I've never gotten a real apology. I try to see Dan's small actions—attempts to move toward a better life—as apologies. It's been years since he drove to the methadone clinic. I have doubted his sobriety less often, but I think he still smokes weed and pops prescription pain pills or whatever he can procure. Sometimes I see flashes of the brother I grew up with, but other times he shows up to holiday dinners with his forehead sweating or is three hours late with improbable explanations. He occasionally passes out into his plate, or bottles of pills go missing from places he's been.

I live three hours from him now, and I'm grateful for the excuse not to see him. He spent a recent Christmas in jail, and I was relieved—was grateful for the reprieve from the tension he

brings. When Dan is in the room my family communicates in eye rolls or concerned looks. When he isn't, my siblings and I plead with our parents to stop giving him money—to stop paying his mortgage and make him responsible for his own life. My mother wants too badly to believe he is past it all.

Even when Dan is not noticeably high he looks alien. He is my brother and not my brother all at once. He shows up on Easter in neon-green, fleece Grinch pajamas and a dirty baseball tee, his face covered in mysterious black streaks like he's come from a coal mine. I cannot find the child I grew up with. The true stories I have of him are not *with* him, but *of* him, and they are not tender-hearted. Once he got stabbed at a gas station in Gary, and my mom, forgetting she hadn't told me, casually mentioned cleaning his wounds a week later. One Christmas Eve he said he had six knives in his pockets—one for cutting fruit, one for cutting people, one for stabbing people, and three for throwing; my family laughed uncomfortably. He went for a walk during our nephew's birthday party and came back with a milk jug filled with rutabagas, as if it were normal to show up at a one year old's party with mysterious root vegetables.

I'm not sure what he thought. I'm never sure. Most people are glass, but my brother is clay pottery. He is just as breakable, but you cannot see through him. I don't know if he's sad or discontent or hopeful. I've stopped trying to understand him, because it's easier to believe he is numb—that there is no emotion left in him. I can pretend the dull feeling I have toward him is okay.

When I got married, my husband and I chose Dan to be an usher. At the rehearsal dinner we passed out gifts for the bridesmaids and the groomsmen, one for our friend who was

officiating, one for the friend who would play guitar as I walked down the aisle. Dan asked if there was a gift for him, and I froze. He had this hopeful look in his eyes, like when my beagle watches me eat dinner. I had gotten a gift for almost everyone, except my ushers—except my brother, who I had given a less important job. “Oh,” I said, “We just got them for the groomsmen. I’m sorry.” My face flushed and my stomach tilted painfully. This was more than just forgetting a gift; it was every moment I’d tried to push my brother beneath the surface, all the anger I couldn’t let go of. I put my smile back on, but I kept thinking about that moment. Three years later, I am *still* thinking about that moment.

After our honeymoon, we looked through the guestbook from our wedding—a photo book everyone had signed like a yearbook. On the last page, in big, sloppy letters there was a message from Dan.

Justin, welcome to our family. Take care of my sister—OR ELSE!

I laughed, but it was the kind of laugh where tears clog your throat. It was twelve little words, but it felt so big. A mixture of guilt and shame and joy made it hard to breathe. In the hoopla of my wedding, I had pushed Dan aside, but my brother was still there. The dork who used to pull scarves out of hats was inside that drug-numbed mind somewhere, and now I knew. He wants the best for me, and I want the best for him, but I’ve revised my expectations. In this new best, he may not have a college degree or a fulltime job, but maybe he can have me. I want to talk to him about his problems instead of pretending they don’t exist. I want to admit I’m terrified of losing him. I want to face my brother in real life, but I haven’t found the will yet.

Dan is heavy—with shame, with regret, with uncertainty—and perhaps I cannot support the whole floor on which he stands, but I can be one of many tiny polyurethane men with hands

upraised. I only need to stop seeing my brother at two different points in time. He is both my brother *and* an addict; I cannot tear those identities asunder; I cannot travel back to the boy who came before the now. I have to love the part of him that *has* hurt me and that *will* hurt me, to learn that forgiveness is not a prerequisite to love. Perhaps I can be like one of the invisible threads that keeps the Mobius ship afloat despite its impractical, circular shape. Perhaps I can summon the courage to give him a call.

Pelvic Cavity

I lost my virginity and broke my pelvis during one twelve-month lease on a third floor walk-up. The deflowering came first, in the fall, then a fiery crash in the summer that followed. I didn't remember careening across the median into oncoming traffic, but my charred car was proof it had happened. So were the pants with burn holes and rubber melted into the threads. I emerged with minor cuts and bruises, a broken right wrist, and a pelvis cracked in two places. But the epiphany everyone kept expecting didn't arrive. My mind felt unchanged aside from the gap where the medical helicopter, the off-duty firefighter who pulled me from the wreck, and the teenager whose car I plowed into should have been. According to the paramedics I'd been conscious for it all, but I didn't remember anything past the monotonous fields on the stretch of I-65 between Lafayette and Indianapolis. I was grateful for not remembering, but I was also unnerved by it. After a few months, thin lines on the x-ray where my bones fused back together and raised skin of a scar on my ankle were the only visible evidence that I was changed.

But the summer before I had sex, and before my car went up in flames, I fell in love, or something like it. The line between love and infatuation is blurred. I had waited to have sex because of a waning promise to save myself for marriage and the fear of the crushing Catholic guilt that could follow. I decided to wait for the right person instead of the forever person. I was a naïve twenty-two, finishing my bachelor's with a summer internship at an alternative weekly in Indianapolis, though I lived an hour away in Lafayette. He was a drifting twenty-nine, a dishwasher at a bar until the winter when he'd go back to being a snowboarding instructor in a

Southern Indiana ski town. We met at the Melody Inn, a punk rock bar where I went to interview the band. During the first set, my friends who had tagged along laughed at a guy dancing by himself, can of PBR in the air, a stoned smile hiding under a flat-brimmed baseball hat. “What a weirdo” they whispered. I took notes about the band and didn’t tell my friends how I envied him, that I wished I could mirror his lack of inhibition. Growing up in the wake of my brother’s drug addiction, I was terrified of letting loose—of the consequences that came with it. But when I looked up from my scribbles, PBR guy was there.

“What’re you writing?” he asked, as I noticed the hugeness of his dimples. I told him about my interview for the weekly, and he was impressed by my un-paid internship. When he grinned, it seemed earnest; his smile felt like a hug from your mother at the end of a terrible day. We talked for a few minutes before he walked away, still sipping his tall boy. My friends raised their eyebrows while I hoped the room was dark enough to conceal the blush of my cheeks.

I wasn’t approached in bars, and especially not by guys like Mike. My too-curvy body and chubby cheeks attracted guys who went to church every Sunday, drank Arbor Mist, and only saw one side of me. I was a fat nerd who attracted hermitic video game players or boys with already-broken hearts. I had dated the human equivalent of training wheels, not men like Mike with his shaggy hair and boyish grin. Not men whose hands looked empty when they weren’t gripping a tall boy. Not the cool, rebel friends of my older brothers I’d always harbored crushes for.

I had been too nervous to ask for his number, but I found Mike on MySpace and sent him a message. I was surprised when he wasn’t creeped out, stoked when it turned out we had mutual friends. It felt serendipitous. We met up one day, and then another. I liked that he wasn’t trying

too hard to woo me—that he didn’t crumble softly into my clutches like other sure things. Mike took me to art shows, and to see indie bands I’d never heard of. We would start dancing in a lifeless crowd, and people would begin moving around us, the vibrating center of our own universe. He took me to a playground, to the big library downtown, to a Mexican restaurant that served chorizo and potato quesadillas at breakfast time. We ordered pizza and watched NOVA with his dog. We played with a massive marble contraption in the toy store. He was new. The city was new. I was new. I felt like my life finally matched the person inside me. So when Mike asked me to stay the night, I said yes. The word “virgin” swam in the back of my throat, but going home felt harder than telling him my secret.

I swallowed nervously as he pulled off my top and freed the rolls of my stomach, but he looked at me in admiration. And when I told him to hold on—that I wouldn’t have sex—he didn’t seem to mind, only shrugging briefly, saying it was okay before carrying on. We showed our appreciation in every other way until we fell asleep, bodies intertwined. When snakes mate, their bodies become tightly twisted, a single woven rope, and our warm bodies seemed inseparable and dangerous as that. In the morning, his hand was warm on my ass. It felt like he was claiming me, and I liked it. When Mike woke with sleep in his eyes, I asked him to tell me a secret. He leaned closer and whispered in my ear, “I’m crazy about you.”

But part of me did not believe a guy like Mike could be crazy for a girl like me, so I expected things would end. I had always known that because I was fat, I would have to settle. I had a history of morphing into the girl I thought people wanted to increase my odds. I was accustomed to being only a partial version of myself, but with Mike, I wasn’t settling. I was getting what I wanted, and I was terrified.

A few weeks after I woke up warm in Mike's bed, he told me he was moving to Colorado instead of the ski town a couple hours south. Even though he wasn't leaving until fall, I stopped calling. I didn't want a dramatic goodbye—some scene from a romantic comedy where I sobbed outside of airport security too afraid to buy a ticket. I thought if I broke things off cleanly it would hurt less, but I spent the rest of the summer singing along to Colbie Caillat's "I Never Told You" and trying to forget his dimples. I tried to forget how his eyes had seen something in me that I couldn't find in my reflection.

When autumn came, I was waiting tables and delivering pizzas while futilely searching for a fulltime job. I stole internet from neighbors because I couldn't afford my own. I cursed the fruitlessness of my four years of college. I hardly slept. I missed who I'd been in the summer with Mike, so I went to see him one more time. It was late, after I'd gone to a concert downtown, and I walked to the bar where he worked. He wasn't expecting me, but he smiled his big goofy grin when he saw me, like it hadn't been months since we'd seen each other, and I missed him even more.

After that, I couldn't stop wondering if disengaging had been the right choice. It felt like the cowardly choice. Maybe I should have given him everything—should have said "Fuck it!" and broken my lease and moved across the country. Maybe in Colorado things would have been better. All the maybes were debilitating. I'd spent twenty-two years knowing what was coming next, but for the first time in my life, nothing was planned.

I wanted someone to help me forget Mike, so I said yes to the first boy who thought I was pretty. He was so devoid of aspiration he didn't have a high school diploma, and some part of me knew I was playing pretend. He had dirty blonde hair and blue eyes, was a bit husky with too

much body spray. We walked together under the fluorescent lights of the shopping mall. I visited him at the grocery store where he stocked shelves. He drank my vodka while I was working late. He told me about the girl he had almost married, and I shared almost nothing. I had once been a full-figured sketch of a person, but I let the lines of the drawing be erased one by one, until I was just a jumble of faint gray lines. On a cold night that could have been fall, or perhaps early winter, I let him take my virginity on an old futon. The sex was like the entire relationship: emotionless. It was a celebration of my giving up—a funeral for a person who no longer existed.

A few weeks later, I ended things and moved on to someone else. I had felt the sweet rush of loving myself *with* someone else, and I had to find it again. It was simple probability: the more guys I dated, the quicker I would find it again. It was liberating to no longer be a weird, prudish twenty-something. I began to revel in the fact that I was no longer un-touched, taking boys into the bedroom before we even had dinner. When the voice in my head told me I was a whore, I would promise to have better intentions next time. But each next time I was no better behaved. I said yes to them all: a stoned co-worker who liked horror movies and reverse cowgirl; a frat boy with a Ugandan accent who took me on the ballpark bleachers; a college bar hook-up when I drank myself into unconsciousness; and the boy who delivered late-night cookies—he brought me warm snickerdoodles and made me think I had found it again, until he stopped texting and started appearing in Facebook pictures with his ex instead.

And then, blessedly, I crashed.

For my pelvis to heal right, I couldn't put weight on my left foot, and with my lime-green wrist cast, it was hopeless using crutches. Staying in my third floor walk-up was impossible, so my family packed up my life. Instead, I lived on the brown, faux-suede couch in my parents' living room a few hours north. I ate on the couch. I slept on the couch. I read *Catcher in the Rye*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Player Piano* on the couch. I got tired of reading about people who could go outside without being rolled out on a make-shift plywood ramp. I became infatuated with a geeky British Youtuber. I found obscure indie bands and posted their videos to Facebook. I memorized exactly two songs on the guitar, with no more than four chords a piece. I played Wii Pinball endlessly. To curb my loneliness, I chatted online with guys from high school whose existence I had scarcely remembered. The screenwriters of my life had gone on strike, but every other network was still on air. I had occasional visits, jaunts outside in my rented wheelchair to a movie or the Olive Garden, but no one had time to babysit a temporary invalid. They all had jobs and hobbies and lives. Mostly, I just sat.

About half-way into my twelve week stay on my parents' sofa I created an Okcupid dating profile. I was bored, and talking to boys was fun. I couldn't go on a date for at least six weeks, but it felt good to have men flattering me. I started small: A geek with glasses and spindly limbs from Lafayette, the town I'd lived in before my broken bones ruled me. We talked daily and endlessly. He seemed okay with slow, okay with waiting until I moved back. Sucked into this correspondence, I ignored my other suitors, whether they messaged with "sup, ur beautiful" or a well-thought out introduction. I was a one-man kind of woman. When the cast on my wrist came off and I could limp along with crutches, I drove to Lafayette. I'd told myself I wouldn't take online dating seriously, but I was effervescent with hope. I met my Okcupid boyfriend at a coffee shop. On the internet he was mysterious in his distance, but in real life, he was a

stereotype—*The Simpsons*’ Professor Frink peeled off my screen. I can still hear his nasally voice and heavy breathing. I was polite and kind, but utterly disappointed. When I returned home, our conversations became infrequent, and it seemed the heavy breather hadn’t been impressed by me either. He became just another forgotten guy in the galaxy of dating profiles.

When I was allowed to bear weight again, my first steps were uneven, one leg wilted into something of a half-leg with half-strength. Despite my wobbling, I moved into a house with friends within a week. Back in Lafayette, I went to physical therapy, riding a stationary bicycle, pushing the therapist’s hand left and then right with my weakened leg. Afterward, I would practice walking in the Goodwill next door, scuffling around with self-conscious steps and feeling the tendons extending in my body as I scanned the racks for mugs with ethereal grandma flowers or retro cartoon animals. For homework I had standing leg lifts, balancing against the edge of the kitchen table as my leg lifted back toward the popcorn ceiling and then sideways toward the off-white walls. After a few weeks, I started hiking through the park next door, my glutes stoked into flames as I walked in the hollows under leaves tentatively changing colors. The joy of being mobile overpowered the feeling of imbalance, but I wondered if walking would ever feel like it had with virgin bones.

And as I acknowledged the changes in my body, I finally acknowledged the fear birthed by my crash. The online dating was part of a serious pursuit: at the age of twenty-two, I was terrified I would die alone. Despite my tiny cat-piss scented bedroom in the house I was sharing, I kept dating. I was compelled by my desperate need to find my person. I promised myself I wouldn’t rush things—that I wouldn’t fuck on the first date. I told myself I was better than that. But it was harder in practice. Deep down I didn’t believe people could see me as more than

another warm body. I wanted to say yes to everything, if it would bring me closer to not being alone. But as the months plodded forward, my life began to read like a list of dating failures:

The soon-to-be software developer. We smoked hookah and made out on the living room couch until my roommate got home. On a half-hearted second group date he stared into his beer. A few weeks later I bought Snoop Dogg tickets off him outside his apartment, like a shifty drug deal.

The badly-dressed Jason Segel look alike. He invited me to his apartment and I went, leaving my roommate the address in case they needed to find my body. We watched TV briefly before moving up to his cave on the second floor. I was ravenous for his loping, too-big body, and his deep-chested chuckle made him sound like his more-famous doppelganger. We didn't have sex, but I let him stick his finger in my butt. He left for Christmas Break and never called when he got back.

The amateur comedian who drove me to the reservoir after a couple beers. Far from any bathroom, he watched me pull down my pants and crouch, hoping splatter wouldn't get on my new Chuck Taylors. Afterward he fingered me in the back seat, and I reciprocated with a blow job. A few weeks later I got rum drunk with his friend and was similarly gracious.

The Red Lobster waiter. After days of sexting in which he called me a slut, we met at a sports bar, him pointedly not paying my bill. After making out in the front of my old Buick we went back to my house. I was afraid I might re-break my pelvis, but we tried to fuck on my inherited twin bed. The antique wooden planks couldn't take it, and one corner of the bed tumbled in the middle of the act. Two days later we tried again, fucking instead underneath his pleather comforter.

If this list seems long, it's because it is long—because this time of frustration felt like an eternity filled only with failure. I wanted things to come easy like they had in the summer when Mike stared at me with his mellow smile; I wanted to wake up once again to a warm hand claiming me, but I was afraid to let myself feel things again. I had choked down too many emotions, left them to gurgle in my stomach unprocessed. I knew when I regurgitated them, it would be terrible, and I was right.

I don't recall the moment when I let the tar ooze under the door and back into my life, but when I began to feel again, I hated myself. My loathing towered over the little huts of self-deprecation I had built before. I had told myself I would gain power or understanding or something from these exchanges of bodily fluids—I had reminded myself that there was a double standard—that I could be a sexual goddess if I wanted to. But I don't think I had ever actually wanted to. For me, it had never been “just sex.” For me, it always meant too much.

And so I had let men call me a slut, because I thought I deserved it. I had become a soft body instead of a person. I had forgotten what dating was like when I had a baseline, without the complication of a dick coming out; I had unlearned my sense of dignity. Somehow, I had lost track of the girl who could feel things when her pants were still buttoned. I had gone from hating my body to doing things with my body that I hated.

And perhaps that is why I ignored every tender spot in my body—each fledgling ache. Perhaps some part of me thought the unease of my body was atonement. I went through my prescribed physical therapy, but stopped as soon as the doctor released me. Perhaps my steps looked normal to the outside world, but I was keenly aware of each foreign footfall. The way my muscles and bones fell together inside me was no longer harmonious. There was a new

concentration needed to keep me going forward instead of veering to one side. When I looked down at my toes during a walk or a run, I noticed how one set pointed forward and the other leaned more to the right. The only comfortable way to sit was with my right leg crossed beneath the other. Sitting straight-legged hurt. But I told myself that pain was a side effect of living until I believed it.

Though my body was in pain, I was learning to love my self, one guy at a time. After months of online dating, I was finally listening to myself. I didn't go out as often, and when I did, I was cautious. I slowed down and let myself be wined and dined. I took myself home. I waited to feel like something more than a body. I had gone on a few dates with a nice but boring guy when I got a new message. I'd hoped a second date would make the boring guy interesting, but it turned out the new message piqued my interest more. The sender was handsomely balding with a soft smile. I told him I was dating someone, but I still agreed to meet as friends.

He bought me dinner at his favorite barbecue joint, even though I'd said it wasn't a date. His whiskers quivered as he chuckled genuinely at my jokes. He looked at me like I was more than I believed I was. We were in a room drafty from the door opening and closing in the middle of a Midwestern winter, but my whole body felt warm.

There is a moment I remember when we were leaving: I looked back and saw him standing in the snow, nestled in his black pea coat, his striped scarf wrapped underneath his bearded smile. He was frozen in place, as though the night had been too much all at once, and he was still staring after me. We hadn't kissed, or even held hands, but for the first time in a long time, I felt something good.

And I felt good, for a long time with him. But three years after my car powered through a guard rail, and three weeks before I would marry the man who'd bought me barbecue on our first non-date, I woke with debilitating back pain. I took ibuprofen and told myself it would go away. I tiptoed to my car and into the office hunched to prevent a stabbing sensation. The pain had been riding along inside my pelvis the whole time, throbbing every so often, never letting me forget who I had been. I wanted to be rid of it, but the pain would not be ignored.

When I could bear it no longer, I went to a chiropractor—a spry lady named Heidi. She had me bend in all directions, probing to see which angles held the most pain. She had me lean into the padded table and lowered it until I lay with my head in a hole, eyes to the floor. I raised one leg off the table, then the other. One arm, then the other. She took a device with a spring like a pinball machine and pressed into all the uneven planes of my body, as though my bones were silver balls. Click and release. Click and release.

Heidi told me one side of my pelvis was higher than the other, that my tail bone was slanted. She described how over time my skeleton had adapted to these subtle discrepancies, leaving one shoulder resting above the other, the nerves in my back pinching in frustration. She recommended ice and rest and continuing visits. As she pressed into me, I mapped each pressure point, recognizing each familiar twinge as problems I could finally name: Hatred. Regret. Loneliness. Fear. They were still buried beneath that good feeling.

Heidi prescribed exercises to strengthen the muscles around my pelvis and back. She set up weekly appointments. She told me healing would not come quickly because I had lived too long in my broken body. But still, when I climbed from the table, I felt better—like maybe my flesh and bones could become someone I recognized again. I shuffled from the office, my back

still one dull ache, but as I walked toward my car I glanced at my feet. They were facing the same direction for once, without my willing them to.

Buried

When my Uncle Carl died, he left behind two homes: the Midwestern ranch house he grew up, and then old in, and a room in a house half a country away in Pahrump, Nevada. I thought I knew about the life he'd led in the ranch house with its lime green shutters (a recent choice, covering their previous faded yellow), but I wondered at his life out west. The desert room seemed like an existence he'd invented, a fiction I would never see.

When he died, I felt guilty for my happiness. Occasionally I would think of him, and remember once again he was gone, would find myself breathing deeper to stop the tears. But I tried to be strong—tried to keep moving. I was a newlywed; I had a new job and was living in the part of town you were supposed to live in when you were freshly twenty-seven. I had a townhouse apartment and two dogs. But it felt odd beginning things with the weight of his ending still upon us; he was nothing now, a body somewhere. He left no wife, no children of his own. All that was left of his was the house he and his parents had once lived in: its insides a pattern of piles, junk buried under infinite other second-hand shit, mysteries of a life yet to be unearthed. A shrine to the man I hadn't loved enough.

All my grandparents died by the time I turned seventeen, so in the years that followed, my uncle was the closest thing. And where my dad often failed to be fatherly, Carl helped fill in the gaps. When my father was harsh, Carl was kind; it was no wonder the two didn't get along. Carl wasn't the kind of uncle you see once or twice a year. He was the kind who took you out for breakfast every couple Saturdays and asked if you wanted to tag along to garage sales afterward. He fawned over your Halloween costumes and bought you candy from the grocery store. He

would pay you five bucks to mow his lawn so you had middle-school spending money or ask to borrow your Hanson cassette tape because he thought “Mmmmbop” was catchy. He was the kind who got you exactly what you wanted off your Christmas list if he could afford it. He was my favorite uncle because he loved me like I thought my father should, unconditionally, without judgment—because he knew me better than my dad did.

But I didn’t know my last Christmas with him would be my last. I didn’t notice what he was wearing or memorize the inevitable puns he said round the dinner table. I wasn’t prepared for it to be the last one. I had taken for granted that he would be around when I needed him. Carl’s heart gave out early on a Sunday morning last summer. I hadn’t known he was in the hospital, but I found out he’d been there for a few days. He’d tried to hide his illness so we wouldn’t worry. My mother was the only accomplice to his withholding. But the secret could no longer be kept when he was dead.

Carl had suffered a heart attack a few years prior. There had been a heart surgery, weeks spent in the hospital. I’d visited him there, but only once. He left the hospital with a new diet to follow, instructions to exercise. My mother had tried to encourage his walking, plodding along with him, but he had never been much of a walker. Even as a child, I had been annoyed by his slow pace, my stubby legs easily surpassing the speed of his full-grown ones. I guess you could say he was a metaphorical plodder, too. He took life as it came, if he wanted something, there was a long, drawn out plot. He was methodical, habitual. You weren’t often surprised by him. Even his death didn’t seem like a complete surprise; it was the slow exhalation of the giving up he’d been doing for years.

When I was young, his Saturdays were filled with morning errands with my grandparents. With two crumbling elderly people, there wasn't much room in the car, but he would always let me or one of my siblings tag along. Those weekends were how I learned to be selfless. We were meant to help our grandmother with her wheelchair, my grandfather with his walker. We'd carry packages of paper towel out to the Oldsmobile, cram bottles of Diet Doctor Thunder between the medical equipment in the trunk, and hold the door while my grandfather limped along with his walker or as my grandmother was wheeled through. After the trip to the grocery store, the stops at two separate banks, the occasional jaunt at the bakery outlet store, where I'd beg for a Hostess apple pie or Raspberry Zingers, there was breakfast. Usually we went to Archie's. In the 90s, this was the kind of place where everybody smoked. They sold off the pinball machine and tried to make a non-smoking section in one corner instead, but it was always empty. It was a Greek-owned, 24-hour diner with neon-pink lights lining the walls, pastel paintings you'd find in a cheap hotel, hard laminated plastic booths. There was a backlit menu spanning the length of the kitchen, a counter where you could put your order in. Then you'd plop into one of the plastic-coated booths and wait for the middle-aged waitress to bring out breakfast. It wasn't special, but it was our place.

Carl would always order the taco omelet, some concoction with peppers and cheese and taco-flavored ground beef buried in the middle. My grandfather would order something with eggs and toast and after the bread was smothered, he'd lick jelly from his knife with the hint of a smirk on his sagging face. It was usually lunchtime by the time we got breakfast, so I'd order my favorite thing, the Hobo Burger—a bastardized version of a Burger King Whopper. It didn't come with fries, but we would order a basket drenched in bright yellow cheese, and Carl would

always help me finish it off. Most Saturdays he would waggle his big black eyebrows and try to convince me to dip my French fries in maple syrup, but I never gave in.

When my grandmother died the summer I was nine, Carl soldiered on, still taking my deteriorating Grandpa to his favorite diner every weekend, despite the fits of rage and swinging fists that accompanied the onset of Alzheimer's. But when my grandfather died a few years later, Carl couldn't step into the place. He still had his Saturday routine, but he traded out Archie's for Louie's downtown, or the Round the Clock restaurant across the overpass. He traded out the several stops at banks for garage sales or estate auctions. Archie's held too many memories of weekends spent with his parents, remnants of the life he'd lived as their caregiver. Eventually, when the pain was no longer unbearable, he returned. The walls were a deep red now, the pink neon lights had been thrown out in the re-model, the pastel paintings replaced with kitschy wall-hanging probably purchased at TJ Maxx. The laws had changed, and instead of a wall of smoke inside, people lit up in the parking lot. It was a new era for Carl, and a new era for Archie's, but it was still our place, even as I became an adult. We had x-ray vision toward the past, could still see the light pink glow against the wall as my grandpa slurped jelly from his knife.

But all the Saturdays I ever spent with Carl gathered into a lump in my throat when I got the call saying he had died. I swallowed, trying not to cry as I nodded "yes" and "okay" and "thanks for calling" to my father. My husband kept asking what was wrong, and I finally squeaked out the words.

More than a year later, his things gather dust, waiting in suspense for him to return. My mother asks for help rifling through his things, and I give in only occasionally, unable to deal with the constant onslaught of feelings in his empty home. The house with the peeling white

siding and citrus green shutters sits lonely, the door hinges growing stiff with disuse. Somewhere in his attic there is a large bucket of hinges bought with no intent, but Carl couldn't pass up a good deal. And then there is The Scrooge McDuck Library, a bedroom he overtook for his collection of knickknacks—books, posters, figurines—bearing the character's face and red smoking jacket. Carl grew up reading Uncle Scrooge comic books, and perhaps as he lived a selfless life it was a fantasy to read about a character who got to be selfish. Somewhere the stamp he special-ordered to mark The Scrooge McDuck library's contents sits unused, ink soaked into dry rubber. There is still a dusty rack filled with shoes and boots of every style and color, a room containing only instruments and musical equipment his hands will no longer finger, black and white photos of his dark-haired comb-over and wide-toothed grin wearing a western shirt in an old band.

What I've already plundered: two ancient Pyrex mixing bowls, a dented yellow cigar tin bearing a serious-looking snowy owl, a pie cutter, a silver ladle, a bag of red chip clips, half a bottle of Leroux Jezynowka Blackberry Brandy, two vintage apple advertisements that I nailed to my dining room wall. I imagine that the items left in his house will be sold and auctioned off for years to come, I picture Carl's Chesire Cat grin sitting on other people's shelves, in their drawers, on their walls. I smile wistfully when I pull a chip clip from my drawer that used to be his.

Somewhere, in Nevada, there was another room filled with personal items, clothing, the mysteries of his existence somewhere I've never been. His car waited fruitlessly there for months, expecting his return. Half of his last year—from August until spring—was spent in the town of Pahrump, Nevada, living with the mother of his close friend. Pahrump is a small town

about 60 miles West of Vegas that calls itself a “base camp for adventure.” Maybe Carl saw it as a base camp to start over, or perhaps he was biding his time before death came.

Before he left, there was a desperation in his eyes, a melancholy tiredness that perhaps was hinting toward his demise. He had nothing left in the Midwest but his junk. His long-term job at the cable company had evaporated a few years back; he’d managed to find work as a security guard at the local outlet mall, patrolling the dark storefronts at night, but it was no job for a man with an ailing heart. His parents were gone. His sisters were busy with their own lives—caring for kids, and then grandkids. He had nothing to stay for, so in a move that was counter to everything I’d seen him do, he left. Though he was acting outside his nature, he didn’t fully commit to the move. He didn’t pack up the house and put it on the market. Instead he planned to return in six months to settle his affairs; at that point he would head West for good or settle back into his old life. But when he returned, saying he would move to Pahrump for good, deciding to leave wasn’t a choice.

And so he left holes in two cities: Pahrump—the place he went to have one last adventure, where he’d formed another new band, playing gigs on the weekends, and La Porte, the Midwestern town he was born in. The town where he knew random guys who from bicycle gangs but was also friends with the pristine blond-haired mayor. The town in which he ate countless breakfast’s with his parents and his young nieces and nephews. The town where I see him every time I return. Archie’s gained another ghost; so did the auction halls, the antique shops. There is an empty space at Thanksgiving, the one where he used to sit while he tried every item on the table and then went in for seconds. But these are only the spaces I’m familiar with.

And his house, still unlivd in, is tomb to many things. The basement smells increasingly of mildew, and the junk in the garage continues to rust. The things I've learned after his death make me hope they'd already been rusting though. After Carl died a suicide note—not his—was discovered amongst a pile of paperwork. I wasn't morbid enough to track down the note myself, but my mother had pieced together enough of the story to tell me.

My uncle had been letting an old friend stay with him. They had been friends and business partners (selling the aforementioned junk) for years, but his friend was down on his luck. Carl did what he was prone to do: he offered help. In the months his friend lived with him, he quietly sold many of Carl's possessions, including costly music equipment. Buried by the guilt of that lie—and other things I can only guess at, he hung himself. Carl came home to silence that afternoon, walked into the garage when he saw its door ajar, and saw the body hanging limp. He helped the authorities pull the body down and hardly spoke of it again. His neighbor knew his friend had died, but he never told her the precise details. He never told me what happened either. Apparently, it was something he didn't want to burden people with. But if he could keep this sorrow a secret, what other pain had he kept close to his heart? Why hadn't I tried to know him like he had tried to know me?

I wonder what other things he didn't want to burden us with. I wonder if I could have been more available—more selfless like him. What other upsets were buried behind the puns and constant recitations of "Who's on First"? What failures were soothed by the strumming of a country song and a well drink in some hole-in-wall bar. Maybe he went West to escape what happened in the garage—to bury all that had burdened him—or maybe he knew death was coming and wanted one last adventure. That's what my father thinks. "Carl came home to die," he says the day before the funeral, the day of the funeral, the ones that follow. It is a refrain he

thinks will comfort us. But he should have tried to unburden himself before he left, he shouldn't have left us questioning. I cannot say if I knew the man I mourn. I cry for him because I miss him; I cry for him because he deserved more from me.

Carl had no wife, no children of his own, and I don't know if he ever wanted those things. I can tell you that he was a good son, a good brother, a stellar uncle. He made loving people seem effortless. At the funeral, my mother tells a story from their childhood. She was the youngest. Carl was riding his bicycle and convinced her to ride along on his handlebars. Inevitably, my mother fell off. He was the older brother, the supposedly wiser child, so he knew he'd get in trouble. Still, he scooped his bleeding sister up and carried her home. I tell this story because it illustrates who he was to me: a perennial martyr. But I wonder who he was when he wasn't carrying other people.

My nephew, Edward was three at the funeral. He wore a little black vest and a frown to match the people around him. His mother wasn't there, so I took him as my brother went up to the casket where my uncle lay, wearing untraditional burial attire—a black t-shirt with Scrooge McDuck screen-printed on it. My brother was red-faced as he left the front of the room, and I hugged my nephew tight, kissing the blond hair on his forehead. He asked why his daddy was sad. I was unsure of what he knew about death, if he had been told anything prior. I was not the one who was supposed to teach him about this mystery. "Uncle Carl fell asleep," I said, "and he's not going to wake up. Daddy is sad because he won't get to talk to him again."

When my brother stopped crying, he scooped Edward back up, but the thing about children is that they're curious. He wanted to go up front, to see Uncle Carl one last time, to investigate what to him was unknown. After being warned not to touch the body, that it would be

cold, Edward headed up to the casket with his daddy. I heard death being explained. “Carl is dead. He will never come back.” Edward nodded his head seriously like he was sure he understood. My brother started crying again, and I took back my nephew. I sat hugging him close, telling him he had to be strong for his daddy, to give him lots of love because he was sad. My brother’s grief was a red face and unshed tears, but mine was a question mark. I wondered why there were so many things about Carl I didn’t know. Had I never looked close enough or was he expert at keeping things hidden? I wondered if you ever really knew anyone the way you thought you did. I wondered if loving only one side of a person was enough. I swallowed back my tears because I didn’t know if I deserved to cry for him.

When it was time for the rosaries to be prayed, my nephew was clutching my arm, unwilling to sit with anyone else, so I whispered that he needed to be quiet and started in with the Hail Mary’s. He was bewildered by the mass of people chanting the same thing, but he tried to join in, mumbling what he thought we might be saying. A few more rosaries in he gave up, looking increasingly confused, like the people around him were in on some trick he didn’t understand. Finally, no longer content to be mystified, he brought his hands to his ears, saying loudly, “Make it stop! Make it stop!” I tried to hush him, and my brother took him out to the next room, but the words “Make it stop” continued as a chorus in my brain.

Mom's Creamy Coconut Cake Recipe

1. Over dinner the night before your mom's birthday she will tell you she bought ingredients for coconut cake, but she'd rather you help her sort things at her deceased brother's house. Listen to her wistful tone; watch her eyes fall toward her plate. Realize she was planning to bake her own cake. Know she has already sacrificed too much.
2. Suggest your father bake the cake. Watch him look up from his left-over pizza in surprise, or terror, as he chews a bite of crust too long. Set the temperature of your face to challenge him. Listen as he begrudgingly agrees, as he warns he cannot bake with anyone else around. You've never seen your father bake anything; chuckle at the very idea.
3. Rise the next morning after your mother has left. Interrupt your father's Google searches to remind him about the cake. "Your mother didn't leave a recipe" he will say, as though it's a viable excuse. Sigh audibly and Google "coconut cake." Find the recipe he is least likely to mess up. Creamy Coconut Cake: just five ingredients. Cross your fingers.
4. Feign interest (you are always doing this, though it's not reciprocated) as your father talks. He's never mentioned it before, but he claims to have dyspraxia, a disorder that affects spatial awareness. This is not the first disorder he's claimed for himself. "Normal people can stir without looking," he says, "but if I look away from the bowl, I could be stirring the air for all I know." Tell him he's simply clumsy, but yield when he gets argumentative. Don't let him see you stifle a laugh. Remember your mother is alone at her dead brother's house.

5. Head to the kitchen for the dry ingredients. Pull a box of white cake mix from the cupboard above the breadbox and a can of sweetened condensed milk from the cabinet under the microwave. Unbury a bag of coconut from the extra refrigerator. Place the ingredients next to the coconut milk already on the counter. Look for Cool Whip. When you cannot find any, move the carton of whipping cream to the front of the refrigerator.
6. Check the recipe again. Pull out a 9x13 pan and place it on the counter. Your father will need a straw to poke holes in the cake. Rifle through drawers until you find a neon blue bendy straw. Lay it next to the pan.
7. As you leave the house, remind your father to start baking—that he will need to preheat the oven—that the cake will need to cool in the refrigerator. Doubt he will do this.
8. Help your mother sort blankets and towels in your uncle's linen closet. Rifle through boxes of old comic books, finding copies so old their asking price is just ten cents; watch your mother's eyes widen with excitement. Smile with her. When your mother's phone rings hours later listen to her end of the conversation. "Use a beater and a cold bowl—put it in the freezer for a few minutes if you have to." Wonder why your father is just now whipping the cream. Wonder how your mother's patience hasn't dissolved.
9. As afternoon reaches toward evening, return to your parents' house. When you get there, watch amazed as your father pulls the pan out of the old refrigerator and places it in front of your mother. Dig the number-shaped candles into the cream, making small furrows in the snow. As is your family tradition, sing the Happy Birthday Song—all three verses. Your mother will not stand for skipped verses. Then clap your hands and sing "Sto Lat,"

the traditional Polish song that holds your mother's breath in her mouth until its final line, "Niech żyje nam!"

10. Watch your mother blow out the candles—wicks nearly drowned. Watch her cut the cake, passing snow-white squares across her vinyl table cloth before placing one small paper plate in front of her. Your father has already started eating, so remind him he was supposed to wait. Watch him stare into his cake, still chewing, while the fork hits your mother's mouth and her eyes close in contentment. Take the first creamy-sweet bite of your own cake. Feel guilty that there are no presents, but tell yourself she doesn't care. Convince yourself the time you spent sorting was enough. Smile, because despite everything, she is happy; wish you could be pleased in such small ways.

Inheritance of Loss

In the shower, strands leave my scalp and find a new home on my hand, clinging to my fingers as I comb through, like bits of sticky spider silk. I let the water run over my hand, willing the fibers to fall. I watch as the hair spirals toward the drain and gathers. The water rises as the clump of what used to be mine suffocates the drain. A few minutes later, I hop out, soaking the bath rug, and reach in to grab the tiny bird's nest of brown hair; the water gurgles through the holes toward the sewer. I hold the hairball in my hand, silently willing the wisps to hop back onto my head.

When I stare into the mirror, my wet strands cling together, and in the blur before I put my glasses on, my scalp is zebra-striped, brunette hair stark against the white crossing its horizon. I'm twenty-six years old, and I'm losing my hair.

My hair falls unevenly no matter what I do; its spirals vary from one day to the next. When it gets too unruly, I cut it myself. I used to straighten it, reveling in the sleek look until a hot shower or the Indiana humidity destroyed my work. Now, I go months between assaulting my hair with the iron, remembering the stray hairs left behind with each touch of the wand. I worry about over-washing. I try to skip a day between washes, but I can't run my fingers through by evening. When I wake late and skip the shower, my next-day hair is a Chinese finger trap that can only be combed after a double-coat of conditioner. I haven't been to a salon for about six

years. I say it's because I don't want to waste money, but really, I don't want someone getting close to the growing bald patches on my head.

So three weeks before my wedding, I'm driving to a salon to do a test-run for my hair. I come with my fiancé Justin and my friend Bernardo, who will be the "man of honor" at my wedding. I don't invite my bridesmaids. I feel like I should be chit-chatting about how I want my hair to look, but if anyone is talking, it's not registering. I'm thinking of the things that won't work with the limp strands I have left. In the weeks before, I Googled retro hairstyles and 50s hair. I Youtube'd how to do victory rolls and pompadours, but every picture showed some big-haired broad, and I don't think my hair is capable of that pin-up girl bravado. When we get to the salon and Nacho (one of Bernardo's cousins) sits me down and asks what I want, all I can muster is, "something with a retro vibe." I don't want to be heartbroken when he sees there's not enough hair.

"I'll take what I can get," I say, gesturing toward my lackluster locks, "There's not much to work with."

"That's what extensions are for, honey," he says, grinning as he runs to the back. He doesn't have the right color, so for the practice run he'll have to use something that looks closer to auburn.

I cower beneath a leopard-print smock, trying to hide the twitching of my fingers underneath the synthetic fabric. I'm concentrating on keeping my feet still, but stillness has never been one of my traits. I'm glad that Nacho and I are occasional drinking buddies, that he knows me outside of my hairlessness. He makes small talk as he works, and I'm grateful for the

distraction. I'm turned away from the mirror, my glasses resting in my purse, so I'm not forced to watch as he transfuses my sad strands with the brassy extensions. I can smell the heat of the curling iron, and feel him combing things this way, then that. I smile awkwardly toward the blur of Justin and Bernardo across the room, and hear them chuckle back. I feel like a little kid at the dentist, eager for the new toothbrush to be handed over, the symbol that the toothy torture is over.

It seems like hours before the first style is done. There's a side-swept bang, a little bump in the front and lots of auburn tendrils meticulously pinned in the back. Nacho sticks a big, bejeweled, yellow thing onto the side so I can feel what it would be like with a birdcage veil or another hairpiece. I like it, aside from the hideous bird attached to my head, but he senses uncertainty and starts over. This time there's volume in the front but it's swept back into a sleek bun made entirely of extensions. It looks like something old royalty would wear, and I'm not classy enough to pull it off. As Nacho walks to the back, Bernardo says that from the front I look like a dude.

Nacho attempts one more style, a low, curly side pony I wouldn't be able to stand for a whole day. I imagine myself flipping it back and forth to get it off my neck, and I don't want to look like a braying pony in my wedding pictures. I decide the first style is best, and Nacho shapes my hair back into loose, wearable curls. I confirm the date and time for my wedding day, and I escape.

On the drive south from my hometown to Indy I compare myself to the before picture on the hair re-growth billboard on the interstate. Do I look like that lady? Does my hair look that

bad? When I get home I Google “hair re-growth” and “Rogaine” and “women’s hair loss” hoping to find an answer to a question to which there is no answer.

I know it’s hereditary; I saw my mom’s hair slowly disappear. I feel less alone when I read that thirty million women have heredity hair loss, then more alone when it says most starts at age fifty or sixty. There are countless treatments on the market, but they require a life-time commitment, no one-time application and “Ta-da!” I don’t want to be slave to special shampoos, vitamins, medications. I know there is no quick fix. I see a future where my hair is not my own.

People often comment on my “beautiful curls,” asking if they’re natural, sometimes pulling at the twirliest bits. They don’t see me carefully combing my hair over the barren spots when I put it in a ponytail or how I scrunch the mousse into my hair just so in the mirror. They don’t see the white islands jutting out of the sea of brown curls because they’re not looking. But I am, and someday, they will, too.

They’ll notice it like I do when I see another soon-to-be-hairless woman walking down the street, or in the office bathroom, or at the grocery store. The barren places come into view as I approach, steadily becoming more spacious upon their globe-like crowns. What was once an island is a continent, and what was once the size of eastern Europe is full-blown Asia.

I wonder what I’ll do when my head is too barren for me to bear. Will I hibernate bald-headed, until one day I show up blossoming with petals of false hair? Maybe my exile will be long enough that the pictures of me in their minds will be blurred. The edges will disappear and they’ll see my smile floating in the air like the Cheshire Cat’s, and somewhere in their minds a tiny spark will say “something is different.” But when they concentrate again on the picture they

won't find anything wrong. They'll look at me, then back at the memory, trying to spot the difference, like in the puzzles of their Sunday papers.

And then there's the question of style: If I have to choose a wig, do I go curly or straight? Do I stay close to my natural color or go blond or red or vibrant pink? Should I parade myself around as if it's the hair I've always had, or flaunt a new head of faux hair each day? I think of bald girls donning hospital gowns, still smiling, or women who've had mastectomies wearing head scarves. I am ashamed I care so much about something so trivial, but who will I be when I am no longer "the girl with curly hair"?

As a kid, people called me Curly Sue. When I was a toddler, my short hair ran rampant, tiny curls falling in all directions in the messy style that only looks cute on children. I was adorable until age five when I headed to kindergarten, and my mother, a novice with curly hair, took to brushing out my curls, leaving a frizzy, triangular poof swallowing my head. It took half a bottle of Johnson's No More Tangles to get a brush through. In middle school I found a style closer to Jessie Spano á la *Saved by the Bell*. Girls at school stared longingly, saying, "You're so lucky you have curly hair." I would smile and roll my eyes, wishing for hair I didn't have to fight with.

Now, I just wish for hair.

I've got thirteen years of school photos illustrating the evolution of my locks. The years that follow will show its slow extinction, the strands becoming an endangered species. My curls make me unique. There were other girls with curly hair, but none of it fell just the same way; their waves were larger, their spirals looser. My hair matches my chocolate eyes and brings out

the olive in my skin. It's always frizzy and never lies right, but I like how it's wild, telling the world it cannot stay within bounds. In school, my best friend and I bonded over our twisted hair. When my locks grew long, a friend nicknamed me Weird Al. In a college lip sync contest, I was cast as Scary Spice because I was the only one with curly hair. I was preoccupied with learning choreography and making my hair look big and beautiful like Mel B's. I didn't stop to consider whether I was appropriating something that didn't belong to me; I just wanted one more memory of my hair before its disappearance accelerated.

Women's hairstyles are iconic; they're an extension of personality, a way of telling the world who you are. Jennifer Aniston still gets asked about "The Rachel," with its shoulder length layers. Marilyn Monroe was just Norma Jean without her bleach-blond hair. We remember Farrah Fawcett's feathered style and Audrey Hepburn's updo in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Keri Russell's haircut was the demise of *Felicity*, when teens across America protested the loss of her curly locks.

"The most important thing I have to say today, is that hair matters," Hillary Rodham Clinton once said to new graduates, "Pay attention to your hair, because everyone else will." She was joking, but comedy is rooted in truth. Our society has shown us that having nice hair helps people land jobs or husbands. It makes people confident, things easier. We live in a world where we feel uncomfortable when average-looking people are on television. We gawk at pages of stars without make-up in the tabloids. Girls compulsively pin hairstyles onto their Pinterest pages. Women spend hundreds of dollars on weaves, extensions, hair dye, stylists.

Men's hair loss is out in the open, but for women, hair loss is hidden beneath layers of shame. Men can joke about their lack of hair, but when I notice other balding women, I'm

voiceless. I want to tell them I understand, but I don't want to embarrass them; it's their truth to accept. In a survey, forty-three percent of men were afraid balding was ruining their attractiveness. They didn't bother asking women, because society has already told us the answer: women are supposed to have hair.

Balding men shave their heads because it's less scarring than slowly watching their hair disappear. But what about women? We walk around hairless and people assume we have cancer. A bald head is a symbol of disease, or inadequacy, for women; for men, it's simply a stage of life.

For a long time I ignored the signs of my own inadequacy. The amount of hair in my brush was normal. Everyone had to un-clog their drain every day. The bald spot was just from parting my hair the same too many times. The terror finally overtook me when my mother washed my hair after I was in the hospital for four days, recovering from a car crash. That trauma was overtaken by the stress that surfaced as my mother worked the knots from my hair. I could hear strands breaking and feel the brush tugging until hair was pulled from my scalp. Pin-pricks of pain signified that more fibers had been emancipated. It felt like she had stolen half my hair. I sulked on the couch like my dog after his three-day vacation to get his balls removed. We shared a similar sense of loss.

I wonder how long my hair will survive. Ten years, maybe. Twenty, if I'm lucky. I think my mother made it into her fifties before she went wig shopping, but I think my belligerent loops will not endure as long as her thin, straight, tangle-free hair.

I remember the first time I saw my mom in her wig. She walked into the apartment where I lived with my brother. Joe and I stared for a moment, unsure who the stranger in the doorway was. In her pre-wig period, our mother had short hair that was blown dry and hair-sprayed into something that looked like a wispy mushroom atop her head. She would bogart the bathroom while she sprinkled on tiny brown fibers to make her hair look fuller. When she emerged the bathroom counter was dirty with little brown bits, and the hairspray fumes wafting out would make us light-headed. Our mother in the post-hair period was a different species. I thought she looked like the “after” in a TV make-over show, a younger, hipper version of our mom, but my brother didn’t agree.

“Take it off,” he said. “I don’t like it; it’s a lie.”

I don’t know why it bothered him. Maybe he viewed it as my mother admitting her god-given hair wasn’t good enough. Maybe he was mourning our old mother and hadn’t accepted this new one yet. Maybe the loss of familiarity was crippling. Or maybe, it just made him terrified of a future where his head was clad in cheap toupees.

My mom shrugged off his remark, but it hurts to imagine how she must have felt, being shunned by her own. She planned her switch from real to faux hair with care. She chose to do it in a time of transition at her job, when several positions at the small branch library where she worked were in flux. One new co-worker saw her once with real hair, but didn’t start work for two weeks. When the woman’s first day rolled around, she didn’t seem to notice the change. My mom debuted her wig on the day of an organization-wide meeting, and when she stood up to talk, she made note of the change, saying, “What do you think of the new do?” She didn’t want

to keep repeating the story. Maybe this is a better plan than hibernation. Maybe there is no easy path for wearing a wig.

I think my brother was wrong: I don't think wearing the wig is the lie; I think saying nothing is the lie.

My grandmother, my mother's mother, died when I was ten; she was nearing eighty. I know her real hair only from pictures, photos of her and my grandfather young and in love. I remember the tiny golden locket she bought me the birthday just before she died; I remember how she saved up pennies and gave them to us in little plastic bags closed with twisty ties at Christmas; I remember the way she always wore makeup on her wrinkled face; and I remember the vanity in her bedroom, with its glass perfume bottles, hat pins, and white Styrofoam heads holding up her hair.

The few times I was there late at night I remember her haunting the halls in just a head-wrap. Without the illusion of hair she seemed like a wise old sage, or the madame down the road selling fortunes from a back room, instead of the blush-faced woman I loved during the day. My grandma was already wearing a wig when my mom was in grade school and they moved across town. She would have been in her late forties when the wig stands appeared. I don't know what it was like for her buying wigs in the sixties. Maybe it was easier then; maybe harder. Maybe she mail-ordered them from a JC Penney catalog. Maybe she had a "wig man" who showed up at her door, toting the latest wigs from Milan. Maybe she was taught the secrets of wearing a wig from her mother, whom I'm told donned them, too. Maybe as a child her grandmother, wearing her own headscarf, whispered a warning of what would come to pass.

I've inherited a lot of things from my mother: her love of books and words and stories; her closets full of trinkets saved "just in case"; her penchant for ridiculous facial expressions; her ability to pay attention to old people who tell infinite anecdotes; and now, her deficit of hair. I'm proud of most the ways I'm like my mother, but I would like to omit the last part of my inheritance. Of course, this thing we share bonds us together in a sense of loss and fruitless longing, a long line of women who learned to let go. Even if I know nothing else about my great-grandmother, one of many in a long, balding bloodline, I find comfort in the fact we share one thing for sure.

It's the day of my wedding and I've returned to my awkward perch under the leopard-print smock. Today, I have my three bridesmaids and my bespectacled little photographer along, and I'm giddy with anticipation. Nacho has been overly-gracious in creating volume, and when I glance in the mirror I feel like I should be headed to a Pentecostal church service. After a slight do-over, he finishes my perfect wedding hair. There's a marginally smaller bump than before, with a few curly tendrils loose in the front and the rest of the curls, mostly extensions, pinned up in the back. The style is finished with an entire can of hairspray and a small, white flower I've hand-crafted pinned to the side. Nacho brushes powder and blush onto my face while his sister makes headway on my bridesmaids. I'm grateful my hair is done so I don't have to anxiously watch their natural locks being pinned up.

Allison, my roommate pre-fiancé, was once drunkenly harassed about her "pageant hair" while out for someone's birthday. I've met her mother, and her grandmother, and she comes from a long line of perfect locks. Even in a simple pony tail, it's big and lovely; it's thick and

gorgeous and bounces like in a commercial for Garnier Fructise. I'm glad I don't have to follow that show. Emily, my best friend from high school, used to be mistaken as my sister, even once as my twin. We were both built thick and curvy, with wild curls surrounding our faces, but her hair remained robust while mine dwindled to a limp bundle too small for a hair tie unless it's wrapped around three times. I'm glad when my sister, who shares my hair loss, but not my sense of direction, finally finds her way to the salon, and the extensions are again pulled from the back room to supplement her thin, dishwater-blond curls. I'm not the only one. This is our inheritance.

Later, after the ceremony, my husband and I are pelted with birdseed, and after escaping the sandstorm my perfect hair is brimming with bits of plant matter. We've still got pictures scheduled with the photographer so I shake my head trying to release all the seeds. I pick out the remains one by one until my hair is close to intact; I'm grateful for the can of hairspray that's acted as a barrier. As people file through the reception line, they keep telling me how beautiful I look, or how different. My father says he doesn't recognize me. He says he asked someone to make sure. I wonder how much of the beauty is me, and how much is the fake hair and eyelashes Nacho glued on.

After all the food has been eaten, toasts toasted, cake devoured, garter thrown, and all the dances danced, my hair is still frozen in place. When my husband and I arrive at our hotel, exhausted, I stare in the mirror with foreboding, wondering how many pins it took to hold the mess of hybrid hair down. As my husband reads wedding cards aloud, I start removing the pins, counting as I go. I'm tired, and I lose count around thirty, but the unpinning continues. In the end, there's an enormous pile of pins on the nightstand and three clumps of brown extensions in the trash. On my way back from the bathroom, I stare at the rubble my hairdo left behind; I look

like a mistreated Barbie doll, hair hacked at and left in disrepair. The hairspray has left portions of it glued perpendicular to my face. It's worse than my normal bed-head, which is already the stuff of nightmares. I sigh, dreading washing the stiffness out.

I walk back to the bed and lay next to my new husband, who is nearly bald himself. He puts his arms around me and pulls me closer, oblivious to the disaster on my head. He kisses the back of my head and whispers, "I love you." I close my eyes and snuggle closer.

When I think about my future children, I wish for boys: Strong, healthy, beautiful boys who will grow into men. For men, baldness isn't an extinction of their identity. I want them to grow old and charming and handsomely bald, like their father. If I have a girl, hopefully I will have the wisdom to whisper in her ear all the secrets of her bloodline. By the time she is my age, I'll likely be wearing a wig, my curls just a memory stored in photographs, and I can teach her how to go about changing her identity, coach her on the courage to accept what you cannot change.

At least I'll know we have something in common.

Lady Bluebeard's Baby

When I was little, lying in the dark, struggling to sleep, an image followed me—not quite a dream. When I was fighting to lose consciousness with my eyes clenched closed, when I tried to think about anything *but* the thing that terrified me, this image appeared.

It was a woman who haunted me. She had a messy bun, a long skirt with ruffles at the bottom, and a white buttoned blouse. She was old enough to have lived, too young to be dying, and her face appeared in sepia tones that made her wrinkles look more like scars. And she would carry a gun, a long musket. She stalked across my closed eyelids as if she owned them.

It didn't matter that I never had a full-on dream. The image was enough. Her eyes were piercing and her face held no remorse. The only thing she had in mind for me was death. And I couldn't close my eyes when I was scared in the dark, because she was always lurking just past consciousness: a ghost of a true story resurrected at my most vulnerable. Her name was Belle.

She was not the yellow-dressed Belle of the Disney fantasy I swooned over, nor the beast whom she loved. She was more akin to the witch who tried to lure Gretel into the oven. But she was a monster more terrifying than fairy tale villains because she had been real. She was long dead, but knowing she had existed was enough. She was my first tangible example of evil, a serial killer who had lived and killed in my hometown. I had walked over the remnants of her footsteps and seen her contorted face replicated in paper mache at the county museum. My maternal grandparents are buried at Pine Lake Cemetery, the same place where seven of Belle's victims lie.

I was born more than a century after Brynhild Paulsdatter Størseth, but I know her story almost as well as my own. The woman who would be called Hell's Belle or Lady Bluebeard was born in Norway in 1859, and immigrated to America near the turn of the century. There, she became Belle Gunness. For a few years she lurked in the Chicago suburbs—her stay there overlapping with a Dr. Holmes, with whom she shared certain qualities. Before people caught on to her misdeeds, multiple properties burned and two husbands died in so-called accidents—all with sizeable insurance pay-offs. With the sudden influx of money she bought a farmhouse in my hometown of La Porte, Indiana, arriving in 1901.

While she lived in the farmhouse she wrote letters—countless adoring letters—to Norwegian men who had also emigrated from her homeland. She lured them with hope of love—of a new life with a wealthy widow, but she always asked them to bring money. And before her secrets became bold-lettered headlines, several of her money-laden suitors disappeared. As the truth about Belle Gunness trickled out, she became more than a name: she was myth, legend, terrifying campfire tale. Some think she died when her farmhouse went up in flames in 1908, but most believe she faked her death, acquired a new identity, and kept killing. I am one of those believers. In my mind she is still alive, still plotting murder, years after she should have died.

In church every Sunday you'd see pious Belle,
The Devil's own daughter, the Princess of Hell.
Belle Gunness's heaven was her slaughter-pen
For she lived in glory of butchering men.

She wanted their money, she got every cent.
And families was wondering where those fellers went.

Did they meet Belle Gunness, her heart did they catch?

No, each one was planted in Belle's 'tater patch.

Well, early one morning the folks gathered round

Belle Gunness's farmhouse had burned to the ground.

They figured Belle Gunness had been burned to death.

They searched through the embers; they all held their breath.

Could this be Belle Gunness, so mean, so big?

The men didn't think so, they started to dig.

Some thirty-two bodies, her lonely-hearts catch,

Was dug up that morning in Belle's 'tater patch.

-Belle Gunness, folk song by Dallas Turner

I'm not afraid of many things.

I'm not afraid of snakes or spiders, shark attacks or jellyfish. I am not afraid of roller coasters or amusement park rides that drop you from hundreds of feet. I am not afraid of unlikely natural disasters or drowning or falling down sewers.

I am afraid of my husband dying. Of my parents passing without warning. Of my addict brother overdosing. Of my sister being hit by a stray bullet at the gun range where she shoots with her friend. Of driving on icy roads with my nephew in the backseat. Of getting pregnant and miscarrying. More than anything, I'm afraid of loss.

My mother miscarried a baby before I was born. My sibling would have been named Patrick, or Patricia, if it had lived outside my mother's stomach. Now my mother has five grown children, but when she talks about that lost pregnancy she still calls the baby Pat. I like to imagine her as Pattie, a sister who is on my side during the battle for the TV remote. A sister who teaches me to blow-dry my hair and use eyeliner.

My mother likes to tell me how she saw me before I was born. In the early months of her pregnancy, she dreamed of a little girl with brown curls and dark eyes, and she woke knowing it was her child. No doctor had confirmed the sex, but she knew she was having a girl. My mother is a practical woman, not prone to delusions or hippy dippy things. She never had premonitions about my other siblings, but she swears this is true: I am the living version of the brown-haired baby from her sleep.

And I wonder if that dream was a lighthouse amidst worry she might lose another child, a message that this time, everything would be okay. I imagine her trying to remember the face from her dream, silently willing her little girl into existence. I want to hug my mother close, to tell her I am sorry for what we lost.

The details of Belle Gunness's early life are uncertain. Some say she came from a farming family, other accounts say she was the child of a tightrope walker and a sword swallower. There is a version of her childhood story that tells us she was a pregnant teenager who lost her baby. At a dance, she was kicked hard in the stomach, the tiny being within becoming a momentary flutter instead of a person. The attacker was not prosecuted, but died

soon after, supposedly from stomach cancer. Later they would wonder if this had been her first murder.

I want to believe this unconfirmed history. I want to believe she wasn't born evil, but was transformed into a monster by grief. I want to believe her wickedness was rooted in something outside of her instead of a seed that grew from birth. I want to clutch this fact to temper my fear of her, but instead it makes me fear for myself. What would I become if I knew that kind of loss?

When my brother found out there was a pool at my apartment complex, he showed up with my nephew a few weeks later. It was a humid Midwestern summer day, the sun high in the sky—only slightly guarded by clouds. My brother didn't have floaties for my nephew, but we figured it was fine because there were two of us—both swimmers since we were younger than Edward—and only one three-year-old to watch. We stayed in the shallow end for a while, me trying to help Edward move his arms in a windmill motion, trying to show him how to propel himself with the kicking of his legs. He wasn't very successful, but I figured he'd have time to learn. But Edward—constantly thrill-seeking—wanted to go deeper. So we swam out deeper with him latched on to us.

When that wasn't exciting enough, he wanted to be thrown into the water, so as he and my brother climbed out of the pool and onto the cement, I grounded myself, ready to catch my floundering nephew. At first we threw him in at around the four foot mark. But then he wanted to go deeper, and my brother moved along the edge a few feet, and then a few more. My nephew was tossed into the pool a dozen times, me always watching carefully to catch him before his body became fully submerged. But we got to the point in the pool where my five feet and five

inches left me only able to stay above the water on my tiptoes, but still Edward wanted to be tossed into the water. And I thought I was ready. I braced myself, but in the split-second it took for his body to go under, my hands slipped on his wet little torso, and he was under the water. I groped the churning blue in front of me, hoping to make contact with the limbs that had disappeared.

When my hands found an arm, and I pulled him to the surface, he emerged still smiling. He had only been under a few seconds, not long enough for fear to be birthed. But for me, it had felt like years. I had felt like I failed him—like I wasn't fit to care for any child.

When Belle's farmhouse set fire, not all her secrets burned in the ashes. They found four bodies pinned under a piano in what used to be the basement. Three children and one woman, supposed to be Belle, but minus a head and eighty pounds lighter than her corpse should have been. Everyone blamed the fire on Belle's former hired hand, Ray Lamphere, because Belle had gone round town saying she feared him. But the framing was perhaps too obvious, and circumstances changed when a man came looking for his brother: Asle Helgelien had gone to La Porte to court Belle and never returned. His disappearance ignited further investigation.

Nine bodies were dug from the dirt on the Guinness farm. The grainy sepia photographs at the county museum I saw as a kid show dismembered limbs carted across the farm in wheelbarrows, suitors whose lime-covered bodies were garbage into gunny sacks. Belle's past was examined with a new severity. How many other suitors had come to the Guinness farm? And what of her two husbands, her prior children? Had their deaths been accidents or pay-off opportunities? It seemed she had dragged loss around like a tired old dog on a leash.

I had just put two loaves of pumpkin bread into the oven when I saw the text from my brother. “Mike Olson was murdered,” it said. He was killed in a sidewalk robbery. One shot to the head. He died within minutes, atop a pile of cans on the ground near a dumpster. It was nearly dark, so the ones who saw the scuffle were unsure how to describe the assailant.

When I heard the news I thought about Mike for an instant, his small frame and gentle smirk, and then of my brother, the one who had texted, the one who had been his best friend when they were both spindly-limbed teens with unnaturally colored hair, stale cigarettes, and Smashing Pumpkins t-shirts.

But then I thought of his mother, and I think of her still: the short-haired lady who had been my high school Literature teacher. She was born to be a grandmother, the kind of woman who would tell you “I’m sorry I was in your way, dear” when you bumped into her on the sidewalk.

I didn’t want to picture her finding out, sitting in stunned silence on the phone somewhere. I stared at her Facebook page, a place that usually transmitted pictures of knitting projects or grammar jokes, wondering when she’d found out, how long it would be before she would share with the world what to many was still unknown. Death brings clichés to the back of the throat, ready to emerge onto Hallmark cards or Facebook pages. Only the good die young. He’s in a better place. He’s at peace. Time heals all. There’s another angel in heaven. I knew I had no words to soothe her.

In the week that followed I compulsively scanned news stories fruitlessly to see if they had caught the killer. In one article they had called his mom. She talked about how he’d been

planning to fly from Oregon to his parent's house only a few days after his death. Then I kept staring at his mom's Facebook, feeling useless. I tried to piece together my memories of him—hoping I could offer up some wonderful memory, but everything was blurry. I wished I could make him real again, instead of someone I'd met once in a dream. Instead of a son who would miss his flight home to his parents. To his mother.

When I look at the Facebook page for her now, months later, I wonder how she is able to smile. I wonder if she ever stops herself when her lips begin to curve upward. I wonder if she ever wakes up hoping his death was just a night haunting.

Belle's past was unburied along with the bodies in her yard—a past that read like a grocery list, homes and loved ones crossed off, one by one. Belle's Chicago confectionary shop, her first home in the suburbs, and her farmhouse in La Porte county, all lost to flames. Two babies died in infancy of symptoms similar to poisoning. Her first husband died on the only day two life insurance policies overlapped. Her second husband supposedly died when a meat cleaver fell on him. His infant daughter had died in Belle's care six month prior. Her three remaining children were found in the ashy remains of her farmhouse. Her foster daughter Jennie, who she'd said went off to finishing school, was found buried in the dirt of Belle's hog pen. They identified the remains of seven hopeful souls who'd gone to court Belle, but countless other suitors remained missing, likely victims of the murderess. Belle was adept at losing people.

But losing is too nice a word. Losing implies lack of intent. She made people disappear. Evidence points to Belle being a psychopath. She had gotten rich from insurance money, but

kept on slaughtering. But still, part of me wonders if Belle just killed the things she held dear. Perhaps she decided killing something was better than losing it—that controlling death was better than falling victim to its whims. Perhaps her murders weren’t motivated by evil, but selfishness. Perhaps her need to fight fate overtook her.

At the end of the summer, my period didn’t arrive when it should have. I recalled the split-second decision not to use a condom a few weeks prior and the fact I wasn’t on birth control. I shook my head, thinking my husband and I should never make decisions when we are already naked. I had grad school to finish, we had plans to move cross-country afterward. We were saving money for a house and a new car, but not for a baby.

I googled things like “early signs of pregnancy” and “when can you take a pregnancy test?” and told myself to wait a few days. I tried to breathe deeply and pretend I wasn’t terrified. I thought of how exhausted I felt after a long day with my niece or nephew, how freeing it was to be alone when they left. I thought of all the things I would miss when I was burdened with a baby. When a co-worker asked when my husband and I were going to have kids I blurted out, “Maybe sooner than later” and gave her a worried look. For four days I lived in suspense every time I pulled down my pants, but finally, a small stain.

And when I saw it, most of what I felt was disappointment.

When I was five, I won a gift card at a holiday party, and my mother took me to the store to pick something out. As the fourth of five children, I wasn’t used to getting my choice, so I walked carefully down each aisle. When I reached the last aisle of toys, across from the pet

supplies, I found her, my perfect baby doll. She was soft in the middle with realistic plastic limbs attached to the pillow of her torso. She had a pink dress and a little pink headband around her bald, plastic head. She didn't come with stickers or neon clothes or have hair the color of unicorn vomit. She didn't say "I love you" or make burping noises. She was just a baby, with life-size fingers and toes, and she was mine. I took her home and swaddled her in blankets. I rocked her in a wooden cradle, imagining that one day I would be as good a mother as my own.

Some part of me has always wanted to be a mother. I have imagined myself with miniature hands clasped in mine. When my nephew was born, I visited him every day for a week, terrified of missing a single moment. Now he is five, and when I babysit, the room feels empty when he heads home. I leave the crayons strewn about partially out of exhaustion but also as a reminder he was there. He is not my child, but the love I have for him terrifies me. I cannot imagine the love I will have for my own child; it could destroy me.

And so I am equal parts terrified and envious of Belle Gunness. She was a sociopath, but part of me envies her heartlessness, the way she took fate into her own hands. She made existence crumble so inconsequentially. She could ignore the constant rumble of anxiety that plagues us all, the knowledge that things can be lost so easily.

I am afraid of the love I will have for my child. I am afraid I will be crippled by it. So I put things off. I give myself every reason *not* to have a child. I'm afraid to utter the words "I want a baby" aloud because the words will make me vulnerable to a kind of pain I've never experienced. A child would be the part of me most easily broken—a part of myself that I would have to let the world touch. And I know the world is so imperfect.

I am afraid of losing my future child, but I cannot lose what doesn't exist.

There was a time when I almost didn't exist—when my car careened carefree across the interstate and into the side of an Oldsmobile—when my mother didn't know which way fate would lean. There was a time when I was almost another child my mother lost. What separated my mother from Mike's? Why had fate spared one and not the other?

My memory of the accident is missing, a small blessing from fate, but the moments I cannot remember are ones my mother tries to forget. I wonder how many minutes passed between the call saying I'd been in an accident and the call saying I was okay. There were minutes when the only people who knew whether I was alive or dead were the crew of a helicopter flying toward a hospital. My mother was three hours away, rendered helpless. And these are the minutes that scare me the most—these missing minutes—the moments when I was a question whose face haunted the insides of my own mother's eyelids.

Shattered

When I pull out of the lot and onto College Avenue, light from a streetlamp hits what is left of my passenger window at the same moment I hear the chunks of glass rain into the seat. And I don't stop. I keep driving. I try to process the cool spring air that shouldn't be blowing at me, remember there had been something on my passenger seat—the quilted floral laptop bag my husband bought me—and that it is missing now. I try to remember what was in the satchel, but an anxious trickle in my chest makes me incapable of concentration. Within a few minutes I am parked in the lot outside my apartment, and I can no longer contain the thing in my chest. It is a subtle shudder, a soft moan at first, and then my body convulses into sobs in my front seat. All that is missing is the bag, a few things, like my kindle, inside it, but I feel wrong. Someone invaded my car; someone rifled through more than just my glove box. At first I don't understand the water that swims from my cheeks and onto the chest of my jacket. I tell myself a broken window isn't worth tears, but when I try to decide how I feel a word pops into my head: violated. And then I am remembering the last time I felt violated—a night I've spent years pretending didn't happen.

I never cried about that night after it unfolded five years ago. I suppose I stored it in the part of my brain farthest from the emotions as a form of self-defense. Even though I expected to, I never broke down into some puddle of a person. Instead, for five years I wondered if I was inhuman—wondered why *I hadn't* cried. I questioned what kind of person not crying made me. I had imagined that one day I would break down in the middle of the grocery store when Lady Gaga's *Just Dance* garbled from the grocery store speakers, the music transporting me back to

the humid college-town club. But within the dim electric light leaking into my car, I realize it is happening now—that the broken window is not the only impetus for my tears.

I close my eyes, trying to stop the memory from coming, but I cannot stop it playing, a depressing indie film of my life. I see myself beneath the neon lights of the bar, paying for that last Long Island: twenty-four ounces in my bright pink plastic mug, three dollars, well. Why did I have that last drink? Was I trying to be careless? Even in the memory I feel foolish.

And then I remember waking up, fingers churning inside me, sun slinking in through the slats of the blinds. I didn't know how many hours I had blacked out. I didn't know if I had told the man whose hand was inside me if this was okay. And there were so many things at once; I tried to follow my memory back to the last vivid moment. I could see myself leaving the bar, a short stumble to his unfamiliar dark coupe in the parking lot. I remembered being outside the door of my apartment. I couldn't picture myself climbing the stairs to my third floor walk-up, but I knew I had staggered into my living room with this boy who should have been old enough to know better—to *be* better. I knew my inebriated body had said yes with each move, and I knew that part of me had wanted—perhaps even needed—this man's attention. And when I woke with his digits exploring me I panicked, but not in the way I should have.

I tried to rationalize something irrational, my brain trying to hide trauma in a prettier package. Although I was a newly-minted member of the sexually active, my more experienced friends had drunken sexual encounters often—and they called them one night stands, not assaults. This was just a one night stand; one night stand sounded more powerful than assault, than rape. I thought that if I said “no” in that moment I would be branded a freak; I would be a

story he told to his pals about a desperate girl who flung herself at him. I would be the girl who went psycho in the morning.

And I told myself I was not the kind of girl who got raped. I was not thin enough or pretty enough; I was two hundred forty pounds of unappealing sadness, and I had wanted—desperately—for someone to notice me. Perhaps I had wanted this. So I laid there, suddenly sober and aware of a man I didn't know touching me. If I can trust my memory, he was out the door a few minutes after I awoke. Perhaps he could sense my pulling away, though I said nothing, or maybe my body wasn't as entertaining when it was awake. Maybe he could feel my vagina tense around his hand. He rushed out muttering noncommittal words like "Maybe I'll see you around."

I had blacked out several hours, and I didn't know whether it was drunkenness or the harshness of reality that blurred things. Maybe I had repressed the last few hours to protect myself. But when he left I began to feel my limbs again—remembered with each tingle that I was a whole person. I began to take in my surroundings instead of focusing on the strange man who had lain in my bed. My clothes lay in a disorderly heap, and vomit was caked into my already pathetic mattress. I was only working part time, so I didn't even have a bed frame, just a cheap mattress rolled out of a box and directly onto the floor, and now it was crusted with pink vomit, the liquid already seeped into the springs in red swirls of color. The evening seemed on par with how my life had been going.

But I am no longer in that sad apartment, in that time of denial when I was twenty-two and afraid. My memory releases me and I am twenty-seven again, relieved to be in the present. I am back at home with my husband, waiting for the cop who will take my statement about the

window. It's nearly one when his police cruiser pulls in, and I wander out into the moonlight to talk to him. He asks what was taken. My husband had gone back to the scene and found my bag—emptied out, but still intact—so I explain that the only thing missing is the kindle—a loss, but not a crippling one. He asks where the bag had been.

“On the front passenger seat,” I say.

“Oh,” he says. “That’s the problem.” As if *I* am the problem. As though this is *my* fault.

“Guys get messed up enough they’ll steal anything,” he continues. “They’ll break a window for a case of soda pop.”

I nod in agreement; I should have known better. A few years earlier I’d driven an old Buick I never cared to lock and a case of Diet Dr. Pepper—of all things—went missing; I know desperate people—desperate men—will take anything.

“Okay,” he says, “just don’t leave stuff on your seat.” I nod.

“Don’t leave things in the line of sight,” he tells me again, for possibly a third or fourth time. I begin to feel guilty for the break in. I begin to think the broken window is my fault. My single beer with friends after class—my careless parking in a lot that wasn’t well lit. This is my fault. I shouldn’t have left my bag in the car; it was too tempting.

Just like I—my body—had been too tempting all those years ago. I shouldn’t have gone to that college bar, shouldn’t have had that last Long Island, shouldn’t have let that boy see me drunk and willing. I was a college-educated woman, and I should have known better.

The cop’s voice begins to blur into the voice that’s been in my head for years—the one that tried to blame this on me. I never *wanted* to be a victim. It was easier to be a fool than a

casualty. I'd thought being a victim made me weak—meant I had no control over what happened. So I had created a different narrative in my head: I was a victim of my *own* weakness, my *own* stupidity. I was to blame for being unprepared. I added this mistake to the list of my failings. Some part of me knew that in the eyes of the law, I had been raped, but it was easier to paint it as a one night stand; I could let the details of my memory blur together like watercolors, until the night became something comfortingly abstract.

When the friends I had gone to the bar with asked what happened after I'd left with "that guy," a chuckle in their voices, I told the easier version, trying to make myself believe it.

"I don't even remember half of it," I finished, smiling dully through my half-truth. I was ashamed that I couldn't remember the night—ashamed of where I did and didn't know his hands, his dick, had been. I didn't want them to feel guilty for letting me leave with him. I knew these friends had had drunken one-night stands so I talked about it in their vocabulary—as if it were something a normal twenty-something should be okay with and not something that made my stomach turn. I told the story as if I had some semblance of control.

If I thought long enough about it, I found myself empathizing with the man who made me a victim. He had looked so harmless when I saw him in the bar—limbs that were awkwardly lanky and an insecure grin. I didn't want him to go to jail because I didn't think he had assaulted me out of malice. I didn't think what he did was pre-meditated. I wasn't even sure if he *knew* what he'd done. I wanted to instead believe the best of him—that he was ignorant, or stupid, or immature—that there was a voice in the back of his head as loud as the one in mind, and it kept making excuses. I didn't want to believe he was truly bad, because then I would be afraid of him.

But a few weeks after it happened I went back to the same bar and saw the same guy. Perhaps I was a fool for going back, but I thought I was coping, trying to maintain that nothing had happened. Wasn't I dancing carefree under the disco-lights? Wasn't I winking cheekily at my friends and grinding against my friend Haley like it was any other night? I was playing the part of a happy-go-lucky girl well until I saw him. I didn't know his name, but when he appeared in front of me, my joints locked in place. I tried to stare at anything but his face—bearing a look of horror that confirmed his guilt—before I retreated into the crowd. I realized my primary emotion was not fear, but shame. I was frozen in terror at what I had let him do, at my whole part in the evening. I remembered enough to know I had pinned him to a wall in my attempt to seduce him—that with my slippery hands against the brick wall I had rubbed my body up and against his. I knew some drunken part of me had wanted someone to look at my overweight body with joyful lust.

And instead of feeling angry or frightened, I felt embarrassed. I should have been seething, but the anger I should have aimed at him I pointed at myself. Instead of getting angry at my rapist, I tried to be rational. I made excuses for a man who had used me. I thought about our society and how it kept telling him what he did was okay. I wondered how many movies about frat boys and drunken parties he watched before he was brain-washed into thinking that he could get away with rape—that it was a normal part of the college experience. I wondered how many articles he had read confirming that girls who wore leggings or jeggings or short skirts were waiting for someone to fuck them. I wondered at all the reasons why a white boy would feel entitled to my body.

And even now when I think about this man, for a moment I still see him as an awkward guy to be pitied. I still see him as he was before he was inside me—tentative and sheepish and

surprised, my curves sandwiching him against the wall. And I have trouble blaming him. It still seems easier to blame myself because some part of me wanted to be fucked.

At dinner with friends a few years after it happened, we talked about the drunken nights of our past and I blurted out, “I was basically raped one night.” But even then I could not admit its full implications.

“I mean, I don’t remember anything,” I added with a half-smile. I followed it with laughter as if to say “Don’t believe me. I’m just being dramatic.” Everyone obliged; they didn’t interrupt to say I shouldn’t joke about it or ask, “Wait, but are you okay?” And I didn’t get upset about their dismissal, instead taking it as confirmation that I should remain mute on this point. I was glad for their silence, because their recognition would have meant it actually happened. I wanted to keep pretending it wasn’t a big deal.

I have tried to excuse that night as something that *just happens* to people. If one in four college women have survived rape, my assault was one of millions, and why should I have the right to complain about something I cannot remember. I feel like my naming of this unsure occurrence lessens the terror of those who have been harmed in a more concrete way—that my pain is not worthy of being written. I wasn’t conscious of the abuse; I wasn’t screaming for help or mercy. I had no voice in this but my body. But in the end, my blurred remembrance of the night will never leave me, and in that way, I am like all the women who survived. There is some knowledge we cannot escape. When I think back to that time, that apartment where I was just a body, I remember a red Kool-aid ring left on the white kitchen counter. Despite several attempts, I could never completely scrub it off. I imagine it’s still there: a faint pink circle only apparent if you’re looking for it.

For years I didn't speak of my assault because I thought admitting I was a victim made me weak. But the silence was what made me weak—the fact that I said nothing at all. Instead I waited anxiously, the pain a foreboding shiver I tried to shake off. I tried to laugh the trauma into myth, but myths are often reincarnated—into new triumphs, new tragedies, and sometimes, broken windows.

On the night my car window is smashed in, my husband tapes a plastic garbage bag over the place where the glass had been. The next morning I drive to the closest car wash and listen as a dollar worth of quarters clinks into the self-pay vacuum machine. I use the wand to suck cubes of glass from the passenger seat, from underneath the vinyl floor mats, from inside the vents. I keep slipping quarters into the machine to get bits of glass that have shattered farther into the back seat of the vehicle and the shallow crevice underneath the seats. Though I vacuum the interior of my car completely and with utmost care, months later I will still find offending bits of glinting blue-green, perpetual remnants of one night's violation.

Sunday at St. Hedwig's

It wasn't even nine in the morning, and I was careening past the abandoned storefronts and long-closed factories that characterize much of Northwest Indiana with my new friend Sal. The bleakness was emphasized by gray, sludge-lined streets in the sunless winter morning. Sal is a Polish/Italian twenty-something with short dark hair, reddish cheeks, and a scruffy jawline. He's a high school Spanish teacher who—on the first night we met—drunkenly sang Polish carols to me across the booth while we awaited plates of eggs and bacon at 3 A.M. I had instantly approved of his dating my best friend, Bernardo, but this morning, Sal and I were on our own for the first time.

He'd woken me up a few minutes earlier, from what was a mere nap following a night of inebriated celebration. The evening had ended a few hours before when I'd fallen asleep to the murmur of my friends' voices woven into the blaring buzz of the infomercial ones. Sal had nudged me awake, asking "Do you want to go to church with me?" He didn't know how I'd teetered between religion and doubt for the better part of a decade, but he thought I'd like the Polish-Catholic church where he plays organ every Sunday. Despite my mangled curls and pinkish eyes, some part of me wanted to go. So a few minutes later we were in the car, on the way to his mom's house for a quick change before heading to the service.

On the way to St. Hedwig, I tried to recall the last time I'd gone to a church. I had been baptized in Catholic church, had spent the weekends of my childhood in Sunday School classes, my weeknights attending youth group or practice for the children's choir, but I was twenty-six now, and my last time in a church wasn't by choice; I'd careened down the aisle in silver heels as a bridesmaid six months ago. My own wedding had been outside—on a Sunday in late July that

felt miraculously like Spring. As a kid, I'd imagined getting married by the altar at St. Peter's church, but I was married beneath the trees in a gazebo flanked in white pots bearing red blooms. I had seen the quiver of disappointment in my mother's eyes when she learned her daughter's wedding wouldn't be in a church, that the sacrament wouldn't be performed by a priest, or below the giant arches where she and my father were married. My husband isn't religious, but he would have married me anywhere I told him to; it was me who couldn't get married in a place that felt so unsure. But now, I was driving to a church with Sal, and I was more than curious.

St. Hedwig held all the usual props and set pieces of a Catholic church—the long wooden pews, the altar with little moon wafers atop it, the unrealistically large crucifixes, the tall white candles lit by altar servers—but this one took me back to one of the churches of my childhood, St. Joseph's. My mom was diligent in taking us to church, but if she was running behind with her brood of five children, sometimes she'd drive the wood-paneled mini-van to a spot by Clear Lake—or one of the other lakes that dotted the landscape of our town. She'd pull her bible out of the center console and read aloud, or sometimes she'd drive a few blocks away and take us to a later service at St. Joseph's. It wasn't our church, but I liked the occasional Sunday when we drove there instead. We'd try to walk quietly up the painfully creaking steps to the choir loft, and sit in the rows of pews alongside the members of the choir. I liked seeing the priest so little and far away, concentrating on the music playing beside me, getting lost in daydreams instead of the boring homily. And as I headed up the stairs and into the loft at St. Hedwig, it reminded me of those occasional Sundays, with the same soft blue painted at the front of the church, the same vertical stained glass running parallel to the rows, and the same view when I looked down on the pews from the loft above, staring at the tiny people below and feeling so big.

For a lot of years, church was the place where I could feel like my existence was larger. At home, I was one of five, and though I always found something to distract me—a book, a salamander, a Hanson cassette tape—I wished my mother could pay more attention to me. I joined the children’s choir, where we sang at mass once a month. I loved warbling at the front of church, was especially exhilarated when I was chosen to sing a solo. My favorite was “Stille Nacht,” because I got to show off my voice *and* my brains, conquering the German words for Silent Night in front of a standing-room-only crowd. I wanted to make my parents proud. I wanted people to love me.

On the weekends when my choir wasn’t singing I liked hearing my voice alongside my mother’s vibrato. I would try to match the perfect quiver of her voice. When my favorite hymn, “On Eagle’s Wings” was the recessional, my little voice would belt it from the backseat—“Maaake you to shi-ine like the suuuuun, and hold you i-in the paaalm of His hand!”—the whole way home. But despite all the musical proclamations of faith, all the times I had recited the “Our Father” and the “Hail Mary”, and the “Nicene Creed,” I never actively chose to believe anything, instead leaning on a genetic predisposition for Catholicism. All I knew was the Catholic Church; the Holy Trinity must be real, because my mother believed it. The people I knew at church had always been kind and compassionate, and so I was buoyed to religion through them. I liked church because it was a community with people who cared about me—from the old priest who knew all our names, to the ladies who taught Sunday school or ran the youth group. I didn’t realize religion was about *choosing* what to believe until I had to make a choice.

At our parish, every boy and girl could become an adult in the church, and be confirmed, in eighth grade. A lot of my peers did the whole thing out of duty, but I took the sacrament seriously. If I was going to march up there to the bishop with his silly hat and affirm my belief in

God, in Jesus, in the Catholic Faith, I didn't want to do it out of duty. As part of our preparation for this next sacrament (we had already leveled up past Baptism, Communion, and Reconciliation) they sent us on a weekend trip away in fields and sunshine with only our thoughts, our peers, and the most evangelical leaders our Catholic church could gather. I was the rare child who loved ice-breakers, team builders, and the things most teenagers rolled their eyes at, so any other time I would have been thrilled for a church retreat, but that weekend I was distraught.

It had been only a few weeks since my father had loudly declared his plan to divorce my mother. The week prior, he'd asked me who I wanted to live with when they split. I couldn't picture the new life coming. I didn't want to start high school in a new house, maybe even a new town. I wanted my family to stay whole. So in the quiet moments that weekend when we were left to ourselves, I prayed, a steady stream of hoping my parents wouldn't split up, and when I came home, it had worked. There was never a discussion as to what had brought a resolution, but my parents soldiered on and never brought up the D-word again.

I thought God had given me a sign, an action that said, "Look, sister, I really am real!" and I wanted to tell everyone how he had captured the little nest I lived in right as it tumbled from the trees toward the mouth of the neighborhood dog. When I walked the steps of the Cathedral to be confirmed, I did it with pride. I thought I had to repay this debt, so for years, I tried. During Lent each Spring, I helped with the living stations of the cross—singing in the choir one Good Friday, leaping down the aisle in joy as Veronica after she washed the face of Jesus in my second role, and finally, in my last year, as Mary, mourning mother of Jesus Christ. I imagined my mother dying to induce fake tears. But still, this dedication wasn't enough—not big

enough, not grateful enough, so I began tagging along to other services, other youth groups with my school friends.

When I found out about my brother's drug addiction, I didn't want to be at home, so I began using religion as an escape. My days were split between school and church, and very little in between. The love and support I got at church became my own less dangerous addiction. My best friend Emily went to a Methodist church, so I joined the worship team there. We sang at the Saturday service, covering songs by Michael W. Smith and The Newsboys and my favorite group, Relient K. I was a chubby teen with low self-esteem, a weird family, an addict brother, and no boyfriend. When I got depressed about life I could get on stage and sing with Emily, pretend my problems didn't exist. I told myself nothing else mattered because I could have God and the church and they would give me the love I deserved.

But it was different now, sitting in St. Hedwig's. Church had ceased to feel like an escape years ago. I felt worn down, like the physical body of the church itself. St. Hedwig's is situated in Gary, a town that thrived when my dad grew up there in the '60s, but is now home to vacant buildings and gas stations where you get a hunch you might get stabbed. Its population peaked near 180,000 when my dad was small, but the steel town declined with the onset of oversea competition, and all the people who could leave, did. Driving up to St. Hedwig's you could tell the money was gone, and Sal parked in the back, maybe hoping his car wouldn't get busted into there. What had once been a grand cathedral was riddled with cracks in the walls, paint-chipped murals, tarnished brass candle holders, carpet that needed replaced. I could still see its faded beauty, imagine how perfect the light must have shone through the stained glass when the church was in its adolescence. I imagined it gleamed the same way I had in the hopeful devotion of my youth.

As people tottered up to the choir loft Sal handed me a pile of song books and told me to sing along. When I looked at the pages and saw many of the songs were in Polish—a language in which I had a sparse vocabulary of “Sto lat” (a hundred years) and “Na Zdrowie!” (to health)—I thought maybe he was joking, but one of the ladies agreed, saying they needed more voices. When I said I didn’t know Polish, a Black lady (whose presence I was surprised by in the very Slavic church) chuckled saying, “Neither do I!” When Sal took off his shoes and started pushing the pedals of the organ, I struggled through, trying to follow the notes while I stuttered through combinations of letters that aren’t caught dead next to one another in the English language. Somewhere in the mixture of the familiar—the prayers I’d learned as a child, the kneeling, and standing, and the motions of the sign of the cross—I let myself forget the reasons I’d left church. I let myself feel at home, for a moment.

The peak of my religious devotion had erupted like Mount St. Helen’s—abrupt and intense—but its decline had been glacier slow, hollowing hills and plains into empty valleys. It turned out that doubt the size of a mustard seed could make you question everything. For me, there had been many seeds, sprinkled through life like breadcrumbs leading toward an unavoidable uncertainty.

I remembered the morning of my first confession, sweating in a pew waiting to talk to Father Vrabley. I knew he was sworn to secrecy, but I didn’t want to tell him my secrets. If God was all-knowing why did I have to go into a claustrophobic room and tell someone else my sins? If God was going to forgive me, shouldn’t I first forgive myself? Did I have to tell him about every time I called my brother an idiot or just summarize? What if I forgot to mention something—was that an added layer of sin?

And there was a moment at a non-denominational service where they asked who wanted to be saved. I had been confirmed in the Catholic Church, but I wondered if that meant the same thing, if maybe I should get saved, just in case. I was nervous, so I stayed where I was and whispered the prayer as a compromise—a back-up plan. But I left with this unspoken question: What kind of God would send you to hell for picking the wrong church?

But it wasn't until college that I admitted doubt was in me, that it had been there all along. When we discussed the Bible in my World Literature class it was an invitation to analyze the faith I'd been trying to hold onto. When we discussed how the portrayal of God changed in the Old Testament from a god who was strict and quick to anger, to one of love and forgiveness in the New Testament, I realized the malleability of God. I tried to interpret him as someone who made sense to me, someone who would learn from their mistakes and change their mind, not as the black and white version the varied flavors of Christianity kept presenting me.

Once I saw God this way, the doubts about religion that had been pricking my skin finally made their way into my veins. Why were people throwing money at a church instead of going where people needed them? Why were millions of dollars spent building rooms in which to worship if God was everywhere? Why did Campus Crusade, a huge Christian group on campus, have cliques that were incredibly *unwelcoming*? Why were so many Christians telling gay people God couldn't love them as they were? My notion of Jesus wouldn't align with these things. And so these questions sat on my chest, making it harder to breathe in the air blowing out from the church windows. My idea of god had to do with love—finding love, giving love, knowing love—and I kept seeing religious people doing things that were inherently hateful. I started going to church less and less, and then not at all.

When the service at St. Hedwig's ended, the priest invited everyone to help decorate the church for Christmas service, which was in a few days. Sal told me I didn't have to help, said he would take me back to our friends' house, but I told him I didn't mind staying. Soon, I was cradling large porcelain statues of wise men, lugging them across the room with the rest of the church's meager congregation. When I had sat aloft with the choir, I had counted the small heads below, and the entire group wasn't much more than forty, but most of them had stayed to help. They welcomed me with smiles and shoved statues in my hands like I was a regular attendee of their Sunday mass.

Working with the people of St. Hedwig's made me miss when church had felt like a family instead of something I was embattled against. I missed the Pastor at the Methodist church—how his sermons weren't the boring Catholic Homily's I was used to; they were engaging, dynamic and thoughtful. And I missed the boys from youth group who had seemed like brothers. I missed Emily, the best friend who'd brought me to her church. I missed how I'd never been afraid to tell those people my secrets, or who I was praying for. Back then, it had been my brother as he struggled to get off drugs, and my dad, because I'd found out he was an atheist. I was using my pursuit of God—the people who made up His church—as a coping mechanism, desperately clutching what little faith I had.

I was terrified by things I couldn't control, and each night, sleep was preceded by the words, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." Nightly prayers became a compulsion. Instead of turning the lights on and off thirteen times or making and unmaking the bed six times before sliding inside the sheets, I had to recite those words before sleep would

come. Some nights, when I have rearranged my body into every possible position, those words *still* sing me to sleep, are my comfort in the darkness. Sometimes, when life gets complicated, I still want a church to hold hands with.

When the decorating was under control, Sal—still apologetic about making me work—snuck me to the building next door. At one time it had been the school that accompanied the church, but it had long since been abandoned for that purpose. You could see chairs stacked high in some windows and the building was in disrepair just as the church. On the backside there was a set of stairs, and Sal let me inside to a kitchen where his mom was cooking. The rest of the congregation was finishing up in the church, but in the room off the kitchen the table was set for them to arrive with plates and napkins and a mish-mash of mugs. The floor was tilting and the tables put together in a motley manner, but it felt warm, kind of like my grandma's small kitchen used to feel on Christmas Eve when I was small. Sal's mom ladled me soup and placed the best chicken salad I've ever had in front of me, as I asked, incredulously, if they always had lunch after service. The answer was yes. I didn't ask if the members of the church knew Sal was gay—or whether he let himself believe in God; I didn't want to extinguish the lightness of the moment. Instead I sat in awe of this lovely little congregation, this make-shift family, wishing I could find a church that felt like home once again.

Over the years, my trust in religion has flickered out, but not my idea of God. I haven't abandoned the desire for belief. Despite the infinite questions I have about faith, and religion, I still *want* to believe in a deity. Maybe it seems prettier, or more poetic, but there is a yearning that hasn't quite dissipated. Perhaps it is just human need for love, for community, for family.

I don't miss sitting through long homilies on Sundays. I don't miss the intricate rules and precedents of religion, but I do miss the families threaded together through people's belief. My faith is like the Polish hymns I sang at St. Hedwig. I couldn't quite enunciate their words, couldn't translate, but I sang anyway. I sang because it felt better than doing nothing. It is easier for me to imagine God than to imagine complex cells and plants and people coming from nothing. I still pray, though I don't know who or what I pray to. I have my own set of beliefs to match this idea of God I cling to—one where "love" and "community" have become the greatest tenets. I believe in always trying to forgive. I believe in unselfish love—the kind you leap into knowing it might hurt like shards of glass sprinkled in skin. I believe in people expressing their love in a way that doesn't feel like lying. If there is a God, he is the place from which all the tumultuous love in my heart has its roots, and for now, that belief is enough.