

Bloodlines

2006

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BLOODLINES

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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in the College of Arts and Sciences
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ABSTRACT

“Bloodlines” is a collection of personal essays that focus on the process of remembering, imagining, and reflecting on the past through the lens of a perpetually shifting present. They consider situations ranging from mental and physical illnesses, from cancer to alcohol addiction, to career changes, to the often dysfunctional and displaced family ties that distance and adulthood have not severed. In “Searching,” I write the narrative of the ongoing search for my birthmother, and how the search complicates the relationship with my adoptive mother, who always feared she’d lose me. Similarly, “Of Flesh and Blood” recounts and negotiates how hereditary and environmental factors have shaped my identity. Loss and betrayal are weaved throughout “Flight Patterns” when I trace the links between relationships among my family and my pets. In “Signs and Stars” and “Seeing Stars,” I search for ways of dealing with my cancer diagnosis and alcoholism, weaving through my past as I fight for recovery.

By exploring the subjective nature of memory and circumstance through sensory, expositional, structural, and even written documentation, I have attempted to capture what is, for me, the tenuous hold on intertwined moments in time by creating a palimpsest of perspectives.

For Momma, and Sheila
May you both rest in peace

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INTRODUCTION: SURFACING

Our past is real, but it is not static. Like the cosmos, it moves unceasingly away from us. What a memoirist captures is a glimpse of its receding illumination.

Peter Ives, "The Whole Truth"

When I was attending Helen Keller Elementary School in Washington State, I read my first nonfiction book assigned by my fourth grade teacher. I don't recall the title, but it was a biography about our school's famous namesake, Helen Keller, who was stricken as an infant with an illness that left her deaf and blind. I never forgot Helen's moment of epiphany at the water pump when her teacher, in a last ditch effort to communicate, used sign language to spell w-a-t-e-r into Helen's open palm as the cool water cascaded around and through their hands. Annie Sullivan had finally broken through Helen Keller's silent, dark world. The imagery of the two bent over the water pump seemed as monumental and inspiring as the message of a girl, deprived of sight and sound, learning to communicate through her remaining three senses.

I found myself scouring the library shelves instead of going to recess, finding another biography, this time about Helen's teacher. As I began reading about Annie Sullivan's childhood, something chinked against the armor of my subconscious. I learned that Annie had a sick brother whom she lost to tuberculosis while they were living at an orphanage. The sensory, concrete details embraced me in a close-up of the scene where Annie awakens and discovers her brother's bed is gone. She gropes her way down to the morgue, trailing her fingers along the darkened walls to guide her, and she can smell the

damp, lingering stench of dead flesh as the coldness envelopes her. Annie reaches her arms out in the empty space and her fingers make purchase with the slick, cool bars of her brother's bed.

That's how I remember the scene, which sent chills shivering through my body and the recesses of my mind, where I had messily stuffed a small closet of memories of my little brother. I didn't discover Mikey dead in a morgue, but when I was five years old, he was suddenly lost to me forever.

At eight years old, I could relate to Annie's suffering. I, too, had been an "orphan," though very briefly before I was adopted. A few years later, when I had an appendectomy and awoke feverishly in the middle of the night, I gripped the cold, smooth safety bars on my hospital bed and wondered if I would be wheeled down to the morgue like Annie's brother.

I had also felt the bewilderment, and subsequent guilt, that I had been responsible for my brother, carrying the burdened emotions into adulthood, until I finally wrote about the childhood experience in an essay in progress, "Remembering Mikey." Even now, when I think about my brother, I connect the memory to the Annie Sullivan biography.

My memory is subjective that way—as personal essays and memoirs always are. I used to body board, patiently paddling into the Atlantic to catch a wave. Many times, I would catch a glistening crest, ride it until it closed out, churning into slush. Sometimes I lingered on the board inside a roaring barrel, on my stomach, which is a dangerous position for the back, and the perfectly formed spiral would propel me all the way to shore. I'd grip the board for dear life, arch backward, and lift my feet to avoid shore rash

as I skidded on the sand. The next body-boarding reminiscence will always reveal a slightly different wave, angle, or outcome, depending on the period of my life that I'm imagining. I can't remember all the times I laughed as my board scraped along the shore-pounded pebbles, unmindful of the watching sunbathers; how often I shrieked and fell off in the middle of a wave, cutting my arms, stomach, calves or thighs on gritty rocks and coral; how, years later, I was terrified but determined to fight for air just trying to paddle out after my radiation treatments. And sometimes a rip current would drag me under before I could even sputter, for no reason other than I was splashing around in nature's territory. My memories surface in a similar way.

When I was a child, I remember finding both comfort and comradeship in Annie's struggles. As an adult, however, I wonder whether I am molding my current perspective and speculation about the childhood guilt and fear into a neatly rounded conclusion to the memory. George Orwell's frank and direct personal essay "Such, Such Were the Joys..." captures the helplessness and degradation of a child who must acquiesce to dominant authority figures, along with the conflict between "nineteenth century asceticism and the actually existing luxury and snobbery of the pre-1914 age" (291). He asks himself, and the reader, whether, thirty years later, it's still normal for a school child "to live for years amid irrational terrors and lunatic misunderstandings" (300). As he points out, it is futile to return to the past, to his abuse-laden years at his boarding school, Crossgates. His written impressions are as an adult, very different from those of the child he once was. His acknowledgment and address of current adolescent issues gives his essay more depth than if he were merely recounting his childhood, and the essay has remained an echo

behind my writing. I hoped that “Remembering Mikey” and “Disobedience,” two essays about my childhood experiences, aspire beyond childhood experience to reflect some of the moral, social, and historical backdrop of the sixties in regard to adoption and mental illness.

In memory, and in writing *Bloodlines*, I’ve built a clumsy, jagged sort of pyramid of sensory, expository, and structural experiences based on my ever-evolving readings. When I was working on my Bachelor’s in Creative Writing, dabbling in poetry and critical essays, dreaming about being a good—no, a “successful”—writer, I was talking with my friend Patrick, who is a retired English literature professor. I described to him a creek I explored near my childhood home in Kirkland, Washington. The next time I ran into him, he handed me Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim of Tinker Creek*, a lyrical, visceral, theological sojourn with nature. The opening lines captivated me:

I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest. I'd half-awaken. He'd stick his skull under my nose and purr, stinking of urine and blood. Some nights he kneaded my bare chest with his front paws, powerfully, arching his back, as if sharpening his claws, or pummeling a mother for milk. And some mornings I'd wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood; I looked as though I'd been painted with roses. (1)

The interiority of her lyrical thoughts about the ambiguity and dangerous beauty of nature gave me a dawning awareness of a writing style that also entertained and inspired me to spend more time reading about, meditating on, and writing in a natural environment. Years ago, it was a rare moment when I consciously read a book just to learn or study another’s method and form of writing, but of course I was enlightened in spite of myself. There is a fine line between education and inspiration.

Shortly after reading *Tinker Creek*, I heard a rumor that Dillard had embellished that opening paragraph, admitting that she borrowed, with permission, the image of the cat and its bloody paw prints from a graduate student. I felt cheated of the truth, but where was the betrayal? Nature is luminous in its ruthlessness to survive, down to the crimson tracks across *someone's* chest. Later in my creative writing studies, words like *ethics* and *poetic license* worked their way into my nonfiction vocabulary. I read essays and articles about writing, such as Scott Russell Sanders' interview with Robert Root in a forum on nonfiction in the journal *Fourth Genre*:

I feel bound by an implicit contract with a reader: I don't invent episodes, don't introduce characters who were not actually present, don't deliberately change circumstances. Of course I may change circumstances without knowing I've done so, because memory and perception are tricksters. (par. 12)

I vowed to employ his philosophy, and in an essay in progress, "Constellations of Cancer," I recorded the conversation between my parents and me so that the specifics of my father's bladder cancer diagnosis would be accurate. Its technical nature created a lot of speculation in workshops about how feasibly honest and creative it was. I had taken many of my stylistic cues from a book I was reading, Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, which juxtaposes her family's struggle with cancer to the rising water levels of the Great Salt Lake. The resulting flooded wetlands near her home in Utah, which served as a refuge for migratory birds, precipitated their decline. But most important, Williams addresses her mortality, and that of a parent, and the painful fact that illnesses like cancer are family diseases. Everyone is affected, and, as Williams writes about her feelings regarding her mother's impending death, "But denial lies. It protects us from the potency

of a truth we cannot yet bear to accept” (76). And in an interview with Scott London about writing and activism, Williams quotes one of my favorite poets, Rainer Maria Rilke: “...it’s the questions that move us, not the answers” (2). Williams’ narrative is not so much linear as it is driven by metaphor and voice. I tried to do the same in exploring what my father meant to me within the realms of both his natural landscape and history in Oklahoma and mine in Florida.

All of my reading in nonfiction has set the stage for my writing experiences; books have entertained and educated me, inspiring me to explore my own writing philosophy and style. Reconsidering Dillard’s purported tom-cat invention, as well as Sanders’s contract with the reader not to invent or alter circumstances, I finally acquiesced that repositioning a non-invented scene to invoke the original emotion was sometimes necessary. When I wrote “Stars and Signs” and “Seeing Stars” about my breast cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatments, it didn’t occur to me, since my thoughts were understandably geared toward survival, to have a tape recorder or camera handy for documentation. I did have a writing pad where I scribbled garbled, drug-induced notes to keep me somewhat grounded, if not sane. The chemical changes in my brain caused my language to stutter; I often confused words with numbers, in both writing and speaking.

Recalling my mind-altered state while receiving intravenous drugs in “Seeing Stars,” with the valuable record of my notes, wasn’t difficult, but writing about memories was. Alcohol and drug abuse had threatened to destroy me before I quit ten or so years earlier, but during treatments for cancer, the physicians assured me that the drugs would

save my life. My situation was gloriously subjective and ironic, but I'm confident that the dialogue in the Chemo Room, while I'm dangerously euphoric from a mixture of four or five drugs, is an accurate depiction of my conflicted emotions that are skewed by memory loss, addiction, and illness.

In 2000, I happened across Patricia Hampl's *I Could Tell You Stories*, aptly subtitled *Sojourns in the Land of Memory*, a collection of essays that evolves around autobiographical writing. I had vowed for years to read it, only doing so out of boredom and desperation when I had taken a sabbatical from my creative writing studies to fight my cancer and the treatment side effects, which continued to amass like a well-stacked accordion of dominoes. I was resting in bed, curtains drawn, after a radiation treatment, feeling the affects of my self-imposed isolation from my professors and classmates. I flipped through the used paperback I'd ordered online and found a florescent green marked passage: "To write one's life is to live it twice." I vowed that I didn't want to relive this most recent experience in any form, that all I wanted was to forget. But as I read through the essay the former reader had marked, and several of my own florescent orange marked lines later, I found dozens of passages that also earned fat, scribbled stars, about how our personal history can embrace the "life-of-the-times as no political analysis can" (37), and how, as memoirists, we must intermingle "narration and reflection" (33), by showing our story while telling it.

My thoughts on chemotherapy treatments were subjective, but not original. A year after I'd finished treatments, I read another book I initially had resisted: Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, a candid memoir of her childhood diagnosis and

treatments of jaw cancer. She employed the term “D-day” to represent her feeling of dread before chemotherapy, and I used a similar term, *Dread Day* (82). At first I was dismayed that my experience would seem plagiarized, or lifted from Grealley’s book; now I just smile in recognition of a simple metaphor that isn’t easily replaced by other words. Our situations were very different, in both our ages and types of cancer diagnoses, but I had the same sense of connection to her memories of the surgery, treatments, and relationships that altered her perception. She writes about her struggle to reconfigure her identity, and decides that if humans can’t recognize her beauty, she’ll be recognized for her deformity. She poses an important question: “How do we go about turning into the people we are meant to be?” (13) Her memoir delves under the barrier of hidden motives and emotions, inspiring me to reflect, explore, and write about my inner truths, as unattractive as they are at times.

Like Grealley, Hampl also emphasizes the discovery process when she states, “It still comes as a shock to realize that I don’t write about what I know, but in order to find out what I know” (27). When I wrote my initial draft of “Remembering Mikey,” I did not at first understand why I included a scene about my attachment to a stuffed Bugs Bunny. It was just a prize won at a state fair by a boyfriend who ended up not being that important in my life. So I assumed the connection was to my brother Mikey’s crippled foot, because the bunny’s seams on his leg were also crooked. Finally, though, the link seemed forced, and I took the scene out; but it resurfaced in another essay in progress, “Crash.” I thought I had exhausted all the memories of Mikey, and I grieved over those

hidden and suppressed moments with my brother. I tried hypnosis, meditation, counseling.

Finally, I mentioned my frustration to Dr. Jocelyn Bartkevicius, my thesis director, who wasn't convinced that my hidden memories would remain underground. She knew I had limited access to family photographs that included Mikey, and suggested I look for the missing family photographs to prod my memory. I nodded, half-heartedly, because I didn't have the courage to bring the bitter subject up again with my mother. I knew she had re-hidden the shoebox of old photos someplace where I couldn't find them, because I surreptitiously searched every time I went home for holiday visits. Dr. Bartkevicius also recommended that I read Lenore Terr's *Unchained Memories*, which addresses why we forget childhood trauma, and when and how these memories return. She writes about how repressed memories that are later recalled often represent the upsetting things that have occurred in our lives. I thought of the mysterious bunny link when I read, "...the child may land on something only remotely connected but nonetheless linked in some irrational way" (197). Terr received letters from readers that suggest that creative activities, such as painting and writing, had launched their childhood memories.

So I kept writing, and on a fourth or fifth revision of "Crash," I had a flashback that illuminated at least part of what that bunny had represented. I was still doubting the validity of my memories, along with my ability to learn from my professors, when I re-read another nonfiction forum article, "'The Person to Whom Things Happened': Meditations on the Tradition of Memoir" by Jocelyn Bartkevicius. My uprooted

conviction that my personal reality was a vital component of my creative nonfiction writing was replanted with these words: “The real self dreams and imagines, and thus, so does the self depicted in memoir” (par. 14).

Months later, wanting to confirm whether I was dreaming or imagining the memories, I sneakily made copies of some old family slides. I went back through the reproductions of Christmas when I was three, and under the tree was the original bunny, one that bore far more significance than the one given to me by a boyfriend, and one directly connected to Mikey. Under the Christmas tree was also Mikey’s monkey with cymbals, one that had always frightened me. I remembered that my bunny had become, for me, a sentry protecting me from the monkey, or rather Mikey’s tantrums. What seemed like a tenuous, irrational bonding with an otherwise unremarkable, crookedly seamed animal would reveal itself in “Crash,” allowing me to integrate my haunted images of a stuffed bunny and corresponding monkey to the memories layered behind the feelings.

While some of these books were required reading, most were only suggested, and the opportunity to read them always seemed to fall into my lap. I was sure, as a writer, that my well of creative writing experience would dry up with my first essay collection. Then I read *Cherry*, Mary Karr’s sequel to *The Liar’s Club*. And I noticed her sparse use of language, drenched with imagery and scene. Along with second person point of view, she uses self-deprecating humor to recall a melodramatic teenage moment that is horrifying in its own right: She is a fourteen years old pondering the injustice of having to rescue her mother from a weekend drunk at a Holiday Inn. She decides to overdose on

Anacin: “Having cried yourself quiet, you now lie down in the bed and cross hands over your chest and arrange the skirt so your underpants aren’t gaping out at everybody. In this pose, you wait to die.” (115) In both her memoirs, she is, as Patricia Hampl phrases it, “stalking the relationship, seeking the congruence between stored image and hidden emotion.” (30)

Then I read post-*Tinker Creek* works by Annie Dillard, whom I’d tried to dismiss as a nonfiction writer because of the possibility that she had taken too much poetic license. In “Living Like Weasels,” an essay about both writing and nature, she nourishes and intrigues me all over again by comparing her writing life to a wild animal: “The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting.” (16)

A few mornings ago, while I was sitting in a hard plastic chair on my pool deck, writing, a flurry of dove, sparrow, cardinal and grackle wings pounded against the screened enclosure before escaping to the nearby rooftops, the sky, the oaks. I looked up at the overcast sky, and a red-tailed hawk was perched on the fence near the bird feeder, asserting her territory, head cocked, scanning for a straggling, weak bird to clutch in her golden talons. She finally flew down into the neighbor’s yard out of my vision. A yellow and black striped swallowtail fluttering over the Philippine violets and golden dewdrops next to the feeder was the only motion in the stillness. I knew, though, that the hawk would eventually find her prey, because on a different day, in 2000, when I had returned home from my fifteenth radiation treatment, I watched another red-tailed hawk swoop into the neighbor’s orange tree and fly upward with a screeching baby mockingbird in her

grasp. While it seemed unfair, it also made me feel that nature was still falling into order. I also have faith that my backyard birds will return; even though their instinct for survival caused them to scatter, that same instinct will bring them back when it appears safe, to return to their garden shelter and the birdseed I feed them daily.

I swim as devotedly as I read, and I recognize the links between two of my favorite pastimes. I dog paddle or breast stroke in the Atlantic near my eastern Florida home, drenched with oncoming waves, nourished and soaked with sea salt. I float on my back, scrutinizing the sky as if I'll find an answer to unasked questions in the patterned vee that pelicans form to propel their collective journey. Where have they been, and where are they going? A flock of late summer geese will then appear, heading northwest over land, and I imagine them migrating to Crystal Beach Lake, less than a mile from my parents' home in Oklahoma. Sometimes the ocean is translucent, and I can watch my toes sift the silky, contoured sand and pull up a conch shell or peculiarly twisted rock while I wonder how many years it took to be shaped and polished that way.

As a writer, though, I'm swallowed by the sea, like a Midwestern tourist who has never swum in the ocean, pulled under by the current, frustrated by the murkiness of the sandy bottom. I know that concealed shells and bait fish are shifting on the bottom, dancing with the tide, but I can only imagine them without being able to pinpoint their location or direction in time or history. I also wonder about the tiger and bull sharks that are constantly chomping their way through the trough between the shore and the sandbar. I could wade to shore, find my place in the hot sand, or I could relish, excavate what I can from the midnight-blue water. Curiosity and a bit of courage will make me hold my

breath, dive to the bottom, groping, until the sea buoys me to the surface, where I sputter and shake salt water from my face, opening my curled fingers to see what I've captured in my palm.

Without centuries of writers to enjoy and study, I'd perpetually hover on the beach, toe posed over the water, afraid of immersion, or unwilling to imagine beyond the troposphere of patterned bird flocks, past the stratosphere of cumulous and cirrus clouds puffing and wisping across a larkspur blue sky.

CHAPTER ONE: CONCRETE AND NAILS

...She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear...

--Robert Frost

I'm sitting in the hot, dusty truck, wishing my fingernails were clean again. Oscar and I are waiting for Rob, who is both my boss and my lover, to come out of the air-conditioned construction office. After he collects one of his weekly checks from a contractor, he will pay us, and I can go home and fall into a bubble bath and soak my fingernails and aching back. I try to ignore my co-worker, Oscar, who is sitting next to me, stinking of last night's, or maybe this morning's, booze. The Eastern Florida sun is unmercifully glaring and hot; alcohol seeps through every pore of Oscar's body, gathering in droplets on the curly black hair on his chest and arms. He fingers around compartments in his concrete-stained wallet, pulls out a joint, and lights it. He is in relaxation mode, thinking the day's work has ended. I close my eyes and jut my head out the passenger window to breathe fresh air. My mother's voice echoes in my ear, "You are doing *what?*" when I told her I had taken a part-time job as a concrete finisher.

Mother used the same tone of incredulous disapproval as with everything I've done since I decided, at age twenty-four, to move fifteen hundred miles away, from Oklahoma to Florida. Shortly after I moved to the small eastern coastal town of Melbourne, I began attending AA meetings, first by the criminal judge's court order as part of my retribution, or as it turned out, rehabilitation, and then continued because I was afraid I'd drink again without the support meetings. Although my mother was grateful

that I'd stopped crashing cars and being charged with DUI's, she suspected AA was a cult, loosely defined in their small Midwestern world by the media—the mass suicide in Jonestown, or hypnotic mind control, or a group of doomsday prophets. In our predominately Baptist-affiliated town of fifteen thousand, we'd all witnessed yellow robe-clad teenagers and adults clanging their tambourines, handing out flowers and pamphlets on cigarette butt and trash-littered corners of convenience stores, and I'm sure mom used the term *brainwashing* and the phrase *you'll be homeless, selling flowers on a street corner* more than once. "My brain needed a thorough washing," I would say, not so jokingly.

Mother's reference to flower children was her alarmed response to the purchase of my first home. Even though I had stayed modestly under the approved loan amount and settled for a duplex in Melbourne rather than a townhouse in Satellite Beach, she was skeptical. *Surely this will lead to bankruptcy*, she warned, even though I had a steady full-time job as a legal secretary. I hadn't lived near my parents in five years, so understandably, my parents still thought of me as a reckless, drunken teenager that they were constantly helping to get out of trouble. After my second drunken driving charge in Oklahoma, they had even taken a ten thousand-dollar life insurance policy out on my life when I was twenty-two, to cover funeral expenses as well as any property damage or bodily injury I might inflict on others.

My baseball cap is pulled low over my eyes, and I peek out from under it through the open passenger window of the truck, across the street to the two-story wooden

building where I used to work, the law firm, that rests on the bank of the cypress and mangrove-bordered Indian River. I look up to the window at the corner of the building, and imagine that I can see myself peering down, across the glistening, at times white-capped river, like I used to do. I stare at the small alcove below the window, the privacy door (or as my former boss used to call it, the getaway door when an unexpected client dropped in) and think of how many times I stood on those steps, concealed from the partners' watchful eyes, taking a smoke break with coworkers and offering them encouragement and advice.

“Go ahead, start out with one class at the community college, you won't believe the feeling of satisfaction you'll get,” I say to Amy, aware that I sound like a walking advertisement for continuing education. Amy has been the firm's receptionist since high school, and I watched her transform from a carefree, perky girl to a married nineteen-year-old with a baby. She is suffering growing pangs and disillusionment that I suspect are partially a result of her pot-smoking, bar-cruising husband. She has suddenly realized she does not want to be a receptionist the rest of her life, because if she ends up single, the position won't support her and the baby. Even if they stay together, her irresponsible husband and newborn motivate her to consider the financial benefits of education beyond high school. She looks up to me, figuratively, because she is literally a foot taller, with flowing black hair. She tends to stand on the lower steps, though, to adjust her eye level to mine. “I wish I had your courage,” she sighs, and I smile, thinking if she only knew that my courage was a mixture of my inherent restlessness and a reawakened, sober desire to be closer to *words*, not in the context of legal briefs, but in poetry and prose, in

self-expression, in teaching the language I have adored since I read *Charlotte's Web*. But then even I didn't know how it felt to step off a familiar cliff into the tumultuous unknown, because I hadn't quit my job yet. I was attending night classes with no husband or children to distract me, but nothing could have prepared me for the lessons and adventures I faced.

I look away from the office, hoping no one I know will drive by and see that I'm a scruffy blue collar worker. Despite the freedom I enjoy not having to think about my appearance on the job and belief that I can perform the physical labor normally reserved for men, I don't claim to perform it easily or as efficiently as those who have years of built muscle, calloused skin, and experience, and I am ashamed of what my co-workers and family would consider a lowered status. My upbringing follows me everywhere. When I asked for *Hot Wheels* sports cars and *Tonka* dump trucks I received life-sized doll heads to coat with make up and design hair styles for. Admittedly, I loved dolls, but I always wanted to branch out to the forbidden male toys which fit my creek-jumping, tree-climbing and stick-whittling personality. Instead of a bee-bee gun for Christmas like my eight-year-old neighbor friend Robby had, a pristine white bunk bed for Susie and Teri, my favorite dolls, complete with a sheet and comforter set that mother had painstakingly stitched together, appeared under the tree. Apparently, Santa didn't approve of gender-crossing toys that would blur the male-female borders of his time. In my family, the mold of tradition was reinforced; why go to college when I could make good money in the secretarial field to tide me over until I married and had children.

I glance at my concrete-stained tee shirt, dirt-dusted legs, and muddied socks and shoes. The calluses on my fingertips snag on everything, even sturdy cotton. I want clean fingernails again, a place to display them, the money to buy silk suits and chiffon dresses. I want to wear smooth silk stockings held up by lacy garters under my clothes, being privately aware of the feminine feel against my pale, soft skin as I walk down the hall at the office. I wish my hair were not wind-blown, that I had time to brush it and money for a haircut, like I used to. I crave a drag off Oscar's joint to escape somewhere else, but if I inhale the offered joint, it would never be enough. I'd probably start drinking again, because my AA friends have warned me that using another drug to replace alcohol usually leads to relapse. Instead of staring at my old place of employment, I'll be waking up bleary-eyed in a hospital or four by four holding cell. *Three hots and a cot*, as the prisoners say. My only view will be bars and a concrete floor. I'll be trying to figure out whom to call, other than my disappointed parents, for bail money if the judge won't release me on my own recognizance for public drunk or driving under the influence or assaulting an officer. So I look past the office to the Indian River, which is part of the Intercoastal Waterway, our nationwide portal to watery freedom, and the porpoises gracefully curve in and out of the waves. I've recently switched my major from education to creative writing, and I dream of being a poet or essayist instead of, or at least in addition to, teaching composition.

I slip my notebook out of the truck's glove box and scribble, momentarily forgetting about fingernails and escape through drinking or smoking pot, and find a metaphor to use in a poems with the image of floating in the salty water as a balm,

dissipating the insidious fear of change and the more tangible dirt that coats my body as I gracefully diving in and out of the waves like the porpoises: The gateway to unexplored territory, the silky lull of the rocking waves. Freedom.

Oscar hastily pinches out his joint between his thumb and forefinger when Rob finally returns to the truck. “We have another pool deck to pour today, guys,” Rob says, and Oscar and I groan. My job as a concrete finisher culminated from a dare, as well as my financial desperation. Months earlier Rob, my roommate Rich, and I had been playing our weekly poker game at my house. We ante up dimes and quarters, playing with a maximum of twenty or thirty dollars each. “I come from a card-playing family,” I say to them before each game. Rich and Rob burst into snickering laughter, but I relish their long faces later when I typically rake in a large pile of silver every one or two hands, which accumulates as the night progresses. I play with the twenty dollars as if my life depends on it, because I can’t afford to lose. That night, though, my pile of coins on the glass dining table was meager. “You guys are killing me,” I complain. “Stop making the antes so high. My cleaning jobs don’t pay that much.” I shuffled the *Player* cards crisply and loudly.

“I know how you can make some quick cash,” Rich says, stacking his pile of quarter winnings. He’s a tall, lumbering man, the third and messiest roommate I’ve had since I was forced to rent out a room in my townhouse to help meet my mortgage and other expenses. He is also in the concrete business, which is how he met and introduced Rob to me in the first place. Next to each other, they look like a construction worker-type

Laurel and Hardy. Rob is a bit shorter than me, and has more meat around his middle than Rich.

“Green, under the table cash.” Rich rubbed his fingers together.

“And what would that be?” I asked, eyeing Rob, who was also waiting for the punch line, watching Rich with his friendly, watery blue eyes as he leaned back in my dining room chair, smoking a Marlboro.

“Rob needs another concrete finisher,” Rich said, smirking. “Don’t you, Rob?”

Rob straightened in his chair, stubbing out his cigarette and shaking his curly blonde hair. “Yeah, I guess. I’m so tired of Oscar whining and complaining, and half the time he calls in sick on Fridays. Worthless Puerto Rican bastard. But—“

His protest hung in the air, and I made a few comments about women being able to do just as fine a job as any man. Rob said he only needed someone a few days a week. “I could sure use the work,” I said, as Rich unfolded his arms and began counting his winnings for the evening and Rob squirmed in his chair. He was trapped, and we could see it, and I was fully willing to take advantage of it. Rich snuck off to his room and I batted my eyes at Rob. “Give me a chance,” I said and kissed him goodnight.

“Be ready at seven tomorrow morning,” he said, and hunched his shoulders as he walked to his car.

I’m not sure why my roommate felt the need to watch out for me by playing matchmaker, and now job securer. I’d just come out of a sour relationship, but knowing Rich, he thought it his duty to provide for a female he considered a potentially eligible mate. His recent choices in the dating department didn’t seem particularly good ones. The

last jilted girl calling the house and drunkenly screamed in my ear that Rich was an asshole, not only because he'd dumped her, but also because he had made her perform revolting sexual activities, which was more information than I cared to know. I defended Rich, since my last romance had ended in similar misery and chaos, with the jilted boyfriend pushing me against the kitchen wall and telling me I could not break up with him or he'd kill himself.

Rob picked me up early the next morning, suspecting that I would be finished after the first sweltering hot day, but the challenge turned into reality when he realized I could dig footers, hammer a few nails, and smooth cement. Before I started working for him, I had no idea, nor did I care, how the cement gets from the spinning cone on the truck to the ground, hardens into concrete, and manages to look smooth and even. Now I know, because, as my parents and friends have emphasized, I have given up a respectable position in an air-conditioned office to become an aspiring writer and a concrete finisher. Working for my construction worker boyfriend.

The following day, I will drive fifty miles west to the college campus, squinting at my nails as I am polishing them. I have mastered the skill of holding the steering wheel with my knee going sixty-five miles per hour down the interstate. A former boyfriend once told me polished nails are a sign of vanity, which I thought at the time was just a malicious jab. He was right. Nail painting is an ancient oriental custom meant to display seductiveness. The henna the woman used to dye the nails eventually became more common and accessible, but even then the decorated nails were a sign of aristocracy over the poor peasant workers who had to keep their nails sensibly short for physical labor.

These vain motivations have influenced tradition through the centuries, and certainly apply to me, but in the past it was a subconscious rather than deliberate act. The nail painting ritual is my armor against my fear of returning to the dreamless, drunken, polluted life I inhabited as a practicing alcoholic, and then as a recovering alcoholic who hadn't dared to step out of the mind-numbing comfort of routine.

Rob and I are tiring each other, and our relationship is now one of convenience. We don't have many common interests other than sex and concrete work, and it's not enough. We won't spend much of the weekend together, with my financial and school work strain and his resentment over feeling pressured into hiring his girlfriend. But today is Thursday, and tomorrow I'll have three days of clean fingernails...and the whole weekend to write what I hope are polished, shaped, and concrete words on paper.

We drive over to a well-manicured beach-side neighborhood to pour the deck, which surrounds a large pool that will feature a cascading waterfall and a diving board. I learned that insurance companies won't provide homeowner's coverage if there is a diving board over the pool due to the high risk of liability. But there are ways for the homeowners to get around that if the concrete workers are willing; they wait until after the city inspector has approved the deck form and then add the diving board fixture. (This job requires wheelbarrowing the cement to several areas of the deck since the cement truck won't fit in the backyard without mowing down palm trees.) My current task is to hold the truck's chute over the wheelbarrow so that the cement does not cascade into the pool. I try to act nonchalant when I see carpenters inside the house, adding the finishing

touches, holding their hammers loosely in their hands, staring at me. I push my *Guy Harvey* baseball cap lower on my forehead to shield my eyes. Even though I'm wearing an oversized white tee shirt and baggy shorts to camouflage my curves, standing with my knees stiff and far apart, I probably won't be mistaken for male. I'm a woman invading their turf.

I remember reading *A Room of One's Own*, where Virginia Woolf shares with a group of female college students how she strolled the path on the grounds of "Oxbridge," which was her colloquial double entendre for Cambridge and Oxford, only to be silently reproached by a male scholar or student she encountered at the phallic-privileged college. I'm aware that my generation affords incomparably more opportunity for women than in Woolf's, but while under the male construction workers' scrutiny, I feel vulnerable and incompetent. I'm grateful Rob gave me the sporty cap to replace my pink one, and for the tan leather gloves that protect my hands from concrete and cover my nails. My nails are stubbornly strong, and I keep them polished because, even when the salmon-pink enamel starts chipping, the dirt under my fingernails is still obscured.

If I were still working at the law office, my nails would be manicured and painted a subtle shade of rose to match the cashmere sweater I used to wear to the office on cold Florida days. I would buy my favorite lavender-scented lotion at *Victoria's Secret*, and listen to the women at the office compliment me on my new hair style, my smooth hands and long nails. I'd complacently know my 401K plan and job security grows as each year ticks by. I'd find comfort in the satisfying tap of my nails on plastic as I click away on

my keyboard in my private office on the second floor, churning out complaints and notices and summons like butter, all while my boss is shifting from foot to foot, telling me *I need this now*, absolutely not *later*, and hits the wall with his pale, doughy fist. My parents will nod approvingly when I tell them I've come to my senses and deserted both school and concrete work, returning to the cozy folds of the law firm. Then, one of the senior partners will buzz me on the intercom and politely request my assistance, because they know I, with my organizational experience, will immediately be able to locate this certain legal form that has escaped *his* secretary's grasp...

"Pam, watch the chute," Rob bellows as my grasp loosens. Right now I'm involved with this concrete form that shapes the damn pool deck, and I need to be careful not to allow the concrete to pour onto the grass. Suddenly, the job has transformed from wanting to do a respectable job on pool decks to avoiding looking like a fool. I'm pissed about my self-consciousness in the face of the male workers because I remember that Virginia Woolf seemed to have no choice but to step off the figurative path of her creative thoughts when encountering the Oxbridge fellow. I'm sure, when she was refused admittance to the college library by the condescending but kindly gentlemen, who stated she needed a college-affiliated escort and letter of introduction, that she held her head high and retained her well-deserved dignity.

Somewhere a radio is playing—I always hear either heavy metal or country music, not that "mamby-pamby pop rock" as Rob calls it. On construction sites there seems to be no middle ground when it comes to anything. Today is country day, and a singer is proudly wailing that he is "Peter, Peter, the pumpkin eater," and the men

chuckle and sing along with the tune, Rob belches in approval, and Oscar skulks off to light his roach. I stand there, watching the thick mixture pour down the chute. The cement splatters heavily on my rigid, sunburned face, and inwardly I flinch, then roll my eyes but manage a smile as the men start singing, “Sweet Vidalia, you make me cry...” I glance out over the ocean, watching the pelicans float and dive with the wind like miniature airplanes, and I feel grateful for the cool breeze on my skin, relieved that I don’t have to worry about runs in my stockings, matching my nail polish to my suit, or putting on an artificially friendly face whether I feel like it or not. To hell with the 401K plan. The price of freedom to choose and mold my future, even if it’s manual labor and creative writing, has no limits.

Would I rather be laughing, moving from person to person, wearing a short red skirt and silk blouse with matching crimson nail polish and heels, purchased with part of my ample bonus, at the firm’s annual Christmas party, pausing to talk to Tammy, one of the secretaries? She gets on my nerves with her whiny nonstop chatter, but in the spirit of the holidays, I ask her why such a long face. “My husband wants another child,” she says, clutching a glass of soda. She faces the moon-flushed river, and from the conference room’s second story balcony we watch a couple of homeless men try to blend further into a tangle of scrubs and mangroves to escape our detection. “I want to quit my job, return to school, and finish my bachelor’s degree...but it’s too late. I think I’m already pregnant.”

“Oh.” I stand there not knowing what to say, and find myself meekly echoing my advice to Amy. “Maybe you can take some night classes. You know half the women in the firm are attending college part-time...”

“Oh please.” Tammy’s eyes stay with mine as she sets the glass down on the balcony’s wooden floor beams, straightens, and puts her hands on her hips. I’m startled by the stubborn set of her jaw, her dark pupils that glitter resentment. “Look,” she says. “You are in the perfect position. No ties, no children, no financial burden. Why don’t you quit making excuses that the writing classes you want to take are only offered during the day? Stop complaining about wanting to write and teach, quit the legal studies program that you hate, and go back to school full time.” She waves her hand around the room full of business-suited, chattering people, discounting them and my ambivalent attitude more completely than if she’d filed a notice of dismissal with prejudice to future filing. Then she walks away. My cheeks burn as I head for the restroom so I can search the brightly lit vanity mirror for a reflection with a similar stubborn determination. After a long few minutes, I can see the resolve partially nestled between a frown and my pursed lips, and a heavy ball forms in the pit of my gut. Within in the next few months I walk away from my ten-year career.

But there is no mirror in *this* bathroom, just crude little sayings on the wall and clumsy drawings of women’s body parts with little captions, one of the mildest being “give it up, baby” and I hold my nose, taking shallow breaths while I use the Port-O-Let with the bittersweet-honeysuckle smell of the blue stuff in the bottom that does a poor job

of concealing the odor. At least there is toilet paper today. I should have waited until we went to the *Seven-Eleven* to use the bathroom. I hope we will be done with the pool deck job before the *shit sucker*, as the guys call it, arrives and vomits its diesel fumes in my face as it sucks out the old waste. I step out of the portable, breathing in dusty but comparatively fresh air, and return to the deck area. Rob and Oscar are sitting on overturned paint buckets, laughing at a construction supervisor who has just walked by and tripped over a board. I frown at Rob and try to ignore both of them. Oscar has lost interest in the novelty of a woman worker by his side, as well as the stares and guffaws from other crew workers that that used to send him into fits of giggles. He is also annoyed that he doesn't have another pot-smoking buddy, since neither Rob nor I will touch the stuff.

The longer Rob and I work together, the less patient we are with each other. Since we have grown stale, this job will most likely end when our relationship does, if not sooner. I mentally try to revise a short story I am writing for my fiction class, but what comes to mind are metaphors of sawdust and slabs of concrete. I try to manicure my mind, and pretend I'm *Castra*, the main character of the story, who is a single, power-driven attorney running her tapered nails through her hair, wondering if her client will ever stop punishing her soon-to-be ex-husband by fighting for possession of two stolen *Pizza Hut* towels and a tarnished set of crystal salt and pepper shakers. She wonders, if she dresses seductively for the annual charity banquet, if she can persuade Judge *Silvernail* to grant her motion of continuance in an upcoming child custody trial.

When I was in the process of quitting the law firm, several junior partners, including my quick-tempered boss, became disgruntled with the senior partners and schemed to jump ship and start their own practice. It was act of deceit that turned the firm upside down. I'm ashamed to say I was a part of it, devotedly keeping my boss's secret until he got caught sneaking files out of the building. Part of the motivation was his promise of part-time work when I returned to school, but he never come through with his pledge. I tried working at another law office part-time, after the waitress job and desk clerk positions had taken their toll on me with the late hours and drunken or disagreeable customers. I returned to my old line of work, which seemed to surround me as the comforting cloud of dust surrounded the Pig Pen character in the *Peanuts* cartoon.

But the last secretarial position complemented my school schedule, and I was just starting to feel at ease when the attorney I worked for dropped hints about my working full-time. Then I discover Amy, my old friend from the other law office, had been hired as receptionist. I was thrilled with the connecting link to my old world--besides, at this firm I was *new, part-time*, an outsider: a thirty-two year old college student who shunned furthering her career in the legal field. Amy brought back the memory of the security of rising with the alarm clock, but at the same time, she reminded me of being a slave to the alarm, grinding to and from work every day. And each Sunday at precisely seven o'clock, after I'd neatly manicured and polished my fingernails, I would develop a nagging headache and begin dreading the Monday rush, the impatient attorneys and clients, the scrambling to meet deadlines.

After I gave two week's notice, I watched the pale but immaculately made-up faces of the secretaries and attorneys walked up and down the hallway (including some of the men, who would surreptitiously wear Clinique foundation, eyeliner and a clear coat of nail polish), talking about their new cars and homes and families. Someone stopped in front of my desk to perfunctorily invite me to lunch. I refused, knowing as they did that I couldn't afford to spend the extra cash since I will be leaving the part-time job at the month's end. As they turned away, I tried to convince myself that I feel pity for them since they spend most of their salary on clothes, daycare, housekeepers, and lunches. Their lives are attached to their jobs or careers, yet many of them complain about their employers and are dissatisfied with the stress their work schedules bring.

Amy is even more beautiful since the birth of her child but she looks sedated, possibly because of the Prozac she has been prescribed, she claims, for post-partum depression. When she was laid off from the old firm, she began a computer class at the community college. She was vague about finishing the class, however, considering her new job. "I needed to go back to work full-time...you know, the baby's expenses, no money to buy clothes or to dine out or anything...besides I was bored at home." I smile in a manner I hope appears understanding yet non-committal, and I tell her I can relate to not having extra money. By the time I return to my desk, my thoughts have shifted to a magazine article that is due for a writing class, and I halfheartedly schedule some hearings and prepare the notices and motions to go along with them. I'm dreading the return home where I will sit at the computer another six hours. To write.

The next week I'm given an ultimatum: work full time, or leave, effective the end of my school semester. The temptation to return to my old life haunts me, but I think about Amy, her baby, and her perpetually stoned husband, and I think about writing. I turn in my resignation.

The cement is poured, and we are in down time, which means that work is temporarily delayed. We are waiting for the concrete to set so that we can finish sculpting it. Rob takes Oscar and me to the convenience store for a big-bite hot dog. Oscar is in a particularly good mood, as he usually is when still catching a buzz from the previous night's vodka, or on Friday, which is payday, when he can afford to play pool and drink *Jim Beam* or *Smirnoffs* on the rocks at the *Last Call*. Oscar and I have insisted upon listening to a pop music station, and we sing along with the radio, "Hey Macarena..." driving Rob crazy with our motioning and bellowing. Oscar proudly tells me that he is a Puerto Rican, and has the beat of the music in his blood...but Rob calls him a nigger behind his back. Later, when Rob and I are alone, I try to explain that this term is neither kind nor politically correct, and he spews forth a lip fart and stares at me, no longer bothering to conceal his growing impatience, perhaps with a bit of contempt in the mix. He can't understand why Oscar lives from paycheck to paycheck, his sole goal being to get drunk each day all over again. They fight and taunt each other like an old married couple.

I quickly learned one rule: to irritate each other as much as possible during "drive time" (which is from one job to the next) because it relieves the monotony of the dirt and

sweat and backbreaking labor they face every day. I must say “they” because I am not really a part of, just a temporary fixture, molding myself into whatever seems to fit, like a concrete form. I stop short of melding into the beer-drinking and pot smoking because it will destroy me. Nietzsche said, “What doesn’t destroy you, makes you stronger.” I’ve already taken that route.

The concrete is beginning to harden, and we take out our tools to finish the job—I’m “magging” the edges, using a rectangular sheet of metal with a handle. My brows furrow as I run the tool gently back and forth, evening out the rock-sand-fiber-water mixture as I try to smooth out the rough edges of my mind, and the cement is like putty in my hands. An art form. When I’m finished the shiny-smooth surface glistens, and I feel proud of my new skill. I feel alive with the fresh air and wind and dirt.

My part of the job is done, so I climb in the truck to sit alone, grateful that Rob and Oscar are finishing up. I take a quick peek at my chipped nails, take out my notebook, water-spotted and dirt-smearred, and I scribble, “grimy notebook, water-marred and dirt-smearred,” and I write “writin’ yo boyfren’ a nasty letter?” because one of the carpenters makes this comment as he walks by and sees a woman writing in a notebook on the construction job. Apparently he thinks it is unusual.

Exceptional or not, it is a beginning.

CHAPTER TWO: SEARCHING

My parents told me I was adopted before I knew what the word meant.

“But you were ours from day one,” Momma always said.

When I was five, I became fascinated by the pearly ceramic plaque that Momma’s mother had made. I stood on my toes and touched the slick, smooth edges, like the inside of a shell. In the curved border a stork spread its wings, carrying a pink-cheeked baby in a knapsack. My name, birth date and weight were scrolled in gold cursive: Pamela, September 14, six pounds, nine ounces.

“Was that what I weighed when you got me?” I asked Momma.

She said no, that was how much I’d weighed when I was born—she and Daddy had actually brought me home when I was six weeks old. She caressed the edges of the ceramic hanging to make sure it was firmly anchored on the wall.

Adopted from day one really meant *from six weeks old*, I thought. What was six weeks, anyway?

I can still see Momma, hiding her nervousness in restless fingers, tapping one Tareyton after another against the ashtray. Her tousled reddish-brown hair was always cropped above her shoulders, and her rhinestone-rimmed cat’s-eye glasses magnified her large blue eyes, making her appear older and sterner than she actually was. Her red lipstick glowed against her pale, heart-shaped face. I wonder how many times Momma prayed that telling me would remove my curiosity, thus allaying her fears that I would turn away from her and look for the *other mother*.

But I always searched for her. On rainy autumn days, I stared out the rain-drizzled front windows of our Yakima, Washington trailer home. When I was five, she was a wavering outline with a pale, shadowy face. On summer days, I envisioned her silhouette against a blue sky and the evergreen landscape surrounding our trailer park. When I was nine, after reading a book on Greek mythology where hills, meadows and streams besieged the fables, I sought her out in daydreams when I peered into the deep blue of Lake Washington, wondering whose reflection would greet me. In the summer, I imagined her searching for me as I played in the gurgling, shady creek with crawdads and time-smoothed pebbles, eating blackberries and exploring the plush-green manicured parks surrounding our new home in the Seattle suburbs.

The woman who had given birth to me had been a teenager, probably fifteen or sixteen, according to Momma. On my birthdays, I would calculate her age. When I turned ten, I pictured her as twenty-six with a creamy white face, large blue eyes frightened and unhappy, haunted by the memory of handing me over to another family. I continually imagined her eyes: always roaming, glistening with regret, searching for the child she'd given away.

Momma was careful not to call my birth parent my mother. She always referred to her as *the woman who gave birth to you*. Momma told me that she was young, poor and unmarried, the pregnancy perhaps resulting from her encounter with an officer at the Spokane Army base. She was difficult to deal with, Mama said the nurses had told Jan, the social worker assigned to my parents' adoption proceedings.

“The nurses said that? Why?” I asked as a teenager.

“I don’t know. She wanted the whole situation to be done and over with,” my mother would say in exasperation, averting her eyes as she threw her arms in the air. “Who knows the price of tea in China?” she’d say, one of her favorite phrases when a question arose that she couldn’t answer, or wouldn’t. Her patience grew thin as the years went by, and I began to suspect she no longer worried about me being kidnapped by my birth family, but rather feared I would go to them.

I never asked Daddy, because he didn’t talk about the adoption. If he wasn’t working at the clothing factory he managed, he was home reading the newspaper, or tickling me until I screamed. When I was growing up, he was a stable, sometimes teasing, but usually quiet tree-bark brown figure in the background. Momma was the talker, the keeper of memories, discipline, and reasoning.

Another woman had become pregnant out of wedlock and given birth to me; Momma and Daddy had wanted me and the *other ones* hadn’t. Momma and Daddy had thick, dark brown hair while mine was thin, dishwater-blonde. Momma had blue eyes like mine, but hers were rounder, a sapphire shade of blue. Momma was short and voluptuous, except for a wide, flat butt that runs in the family. Both of her Irish-Scottish sisters and her mother had the same figures: large breasts, short waists, round bellies, and thin, shapely legs. I didn’t seem to resemble any of our family members, but Jan, the caseworker, had told Momma that I was half German, half Irish, just like them. I grew tall and slender, with a distinctly bubbled back-end that stuck out far enough to hold a teacup. “I wish I had that swing in my backyard,” Mom would tease.

On Daddy's German side of the family, his parents and siblings were all big-boned, well over six feet tall, with large brown eyes and eyelids that crinkled when they laughed in broad, square faces. Daddy was the best looking of his sister and two brothers. I thought he looked and acted like Robert Reed, the father in *The Brady Bunch*.

I have a photo of my father and me when I am six. We are sitting on adjacent rocks at the mouth of the Snohomish River, a sandy, shallow sea-glass green behind us. Daddy's trout basket is open, and he's attaching a lure to his line. He pauses, in his fisherman's cap, plaid shirt, and thigh-high rubber wading boots, to pose for my mother, who is snapping the picture during one of our many campouts in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Daddy's face is ruddier than normal, shadowed with two-day stubble. I can smell his trout basket--mingled fish, leather, and straw. I am not looking at the camera, but leaning forward, resting my hands against my pedal-pusher clad knees. I squint against the sun, watching my father with pure adulation.

By the time I was in seventh grade, I decided that my birthmother was thin and tall like me (but probably had perfectly proportioned hips), with fine, light brown hair, with hazel eyes, or maybe a bit darker hair, like Ali McGraw, whom I'd seen in the movie, *Love Story*. My natural father, who I figured resembled Robert Redford, had blond hair, blue eyes, and a straight ski-slope nose that I'd inherited and that the boys in schools always teased me about. He probably worked long hours like Daddy, and my natural mother was a homemaker with a yellow kitchen and a mountain of flowers in her yard, just like Momma.

I searched for my birth mother and possible relatives around town, when I still lived in Washington. Although I lived around two hundred miles west of my birthplace, Spokane, it didn't seem farfetched to me that family would be spread out around the Seattle area. When I went to Totem Lake Mall for ice cream and grocery shopping with Momma, I'd surreptitiously watch the other women eating hamburgers or carrying their shopping bags, or at Safeway, pushing carts down the aisles. I wondered if I'd see my own blue eyes, straight nose, or maybe a gesture. Would I know the touch, if I brushed fingers with my natural mother when Momma asked me to pick out celery in the produce section?

One time, while I was standing alone in Safeway's checkout line buying a candy bar, a very tall, big-boned lady with brownish, graying hair stood behind me, and her blue eyes seemed to bore a hole through me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. For years, I wondered about that lady, whether she was merely impatient or bored in the line, or if I reminded her of *her* daughter.

I had watched my close girlfriends fight with their brothers and sisters. When they were glowering at each other, nose to nose, arguing over who could claim the front yard as their territory or who had first rights to the last of the ice cream, I could see the same upturned nose, or pointed chin, or similar hair. These squabbling siblings would turn on a dime if someone else threatened them, standing united against outsiders. Even after my closest friends and I pricked our fingers, rubbing our bleeding pinkies together, I recognized that our mingled blood of sisterhood couldn't withstand time like true siblings could.

When I was twelve, my parents decided to move back to Oklahoma, where their parents lived. As we wheeled out of Kirkland, Washington in our tall U-Haul moving van, I sadly waved at my neighboring friends and stuck my tongue out at the bullies who watched us. When I'd learned we were moving, my secret hope of running into my birth mother began to crumble. Surely none of my birth relatives would venture from a beautiful western coast of emerald mountains and clear river streams to live in a hick town in the middle of Oklahoma.

Shortly after our move, I turned thirteen. My speculation turned to practical matters. Since we lived fifteen hundred miles from my birthplace, I figured my chances of dating someone I was related to decreased dramatically. Still, I was always careful to ask my teenage friends and, two years later, my dates where they had been born, just in case. While I would have been thrilled to find out a close friend was actually my blood sister or cousin, I lived in fear of becoming like those young couples I'd heard stories about who applied for their marriage license and were refused because blood tests showed they were related.

Then, when I turned fifteen, all I thought about was unrequited love. I mourned my low-profile, plain Jane existence. I fancied I was half in love with Steve, a beautiful blonde-haired boy, and who coincidentally resembled my imagined birth father, when he led a popular basketball queen to her stage of glory on the football field platform. I longed for the missing puzzle piece forever lost whenever I thought of my birth mother, and where I came from.

Momma had always warned me about alcohol, how dangerous it was to drink. *I could have become an alcoholic*, she said, *had your father not put a stop to it*. Momma had started drinking over the bitterness of her past, including a three year marriage that had failed. She was nineteen and divorced when she met Daddy. I was sufficiently awed to not want to drink, but decided to experiment one night and get it over with. What harm could come from one drink? The alcohol numbed my teenage insecurity. I could conquer anything after the fiery liquid ran down my throat. At sixteen, I turned to drinking to drown out the questions of my adoption as well as my anxieties.

Through early adulthood, when I told people that I was adopted, they were fascinated, asking questions like, “Do you wonder who your real parents were?” or “Are you searching for them?” I would shake my head. On the one hand, I had never considered my adoptive parents anything other than my real parents, but on the other, I didn’t know how to articulate, without being denounced as disloyal, that I always wondered about the mystery of my birth family. In 1988, when I was twenty-six, I grew tired of the speculating and imagining the circumstances surrounding my birth, and decided to search in earnest.

For fifteen dollars, I asked Washington State Vital Records for my non-identity, and they obliged. On the 4 X 11 form were the carefully penned answers in cursive. Race of birthmother: *White*. Race of Birthfather: *Unknown*. Occupations and ages of parents: *Unknown*. Complications at birth: *None given*. *Single birth*.

I studied the onion-skin paper for months, afraid it would dissolve between my fingers, while I sat in my cubicle at the Florida law office where I worked as a legal secretary. I tried to imagine the person who had written in the answers and decided she was female, given the wide, slanted loops of writing. She took on the malevolent appearance of my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Van Dyke, who had iron gray hair and a grumpy disposition as five-year-olds screamed and jumped and scrambled around her legs. This woman, this *clerk*, had sat at her desk, probably with a copy of my original, sealed birth certificate held in her left hand as she scrawled the *None given and not known* on my form with her right hand. *She* had access to my hidden identity and heritage at her gnarled fingertips.

I dreamed of moving to Spokane, my place of birth, and applying for a job as a clerk in the county courthouse. Once there, I would sneak into the room with the gray metal filing cabinets, break the locks if necessary, and, by God, unseal my birth records. I'd also serve as an insider to all the other adoptees that were denied the same information, like the animal rights groups that crept into laboratories, releasing all their furry captives. Never mind that stealing or disclosing government information was a felony. At that time, I had no idea that this idea wasn't original; during the fifties, insiders who supported the right to know their history had done just that.

I had discovered a relatively young organization, "Right to Know," that listed the meager resources to search for birth families. The major resource was International Soundex Reunion Registry, a non-profit organization that holds a database of searching family members. Internet access is still years into the future, so postal mail was the only

way to register with the database. The catch was that a member of my “natural” family, would have to be registered in order to come up with a match. After weeks of waiting, I received the forms, filled out my date and county of birth, the social worker’s name, and my adoptive parents’ information. I waited another month to hear back from ISRR. No match. Apparently, no one from my biological family had registered.

When I realized no one was looking for me, I could hear Momma’s shaky voice, begging me not to open a can full of worms. While she had grudgingly given me the full name of Jan, the caseworker who’d handled my adoption, she tearfully warned me, with backup from some of the reunion-gone-bad television movies, that I could be rejected. *The woman who gave birth* to me probably didn’t want to be found. What if she had kept her past a secret from her husband, and most likely, her children? “I don’t want you to be hurt,” she’d said.

I was twenty-six when I received my non-identifying information, having moved fifteen hundred miles from Oklahoma to avoid my parents, who constantly nagged me about my continued drinking. I told myself I was searching for freedom—to be an adult, to extricate myself from Momma’s tight cloak of protectiveness. Two years into Florida, I was finally a few months sober and attending a twelve-step recovery program. One morning, I was standing between the law office’s cubicles, fighting off a queasiness that I could only attribute to a premonition or maybe just the vestiges of a dream the night before. I didn’t remember what the dream was about, only that my birthmother was in trouble. She would be in her forties, and I envisioned her older, heavier, out of sync.

Momma always had premonitions—she knew when I was in trouble, as if my very breath and heartbeat coursed through her own. Often, she called me long distance in a state of panic, somehow knowing that in Florida I'd crashed a car or fallen and ripped open my leg or busted my forehead against a table. I believed in her intuition—we'd lived together for nineteen years. But I couldn't grasp why I had this hunch about a woman I had no memories of, no physical connection with, other than nine months in her womb, that could explain this feeling. I was also learning that alcoholism was hereditary. Other than an occasional cold bottle of beer Daddy would set on the front porch steps when he mowed the lawn on Sundays, I never saw my parents drink. I wondered about blood being thicker than water, than environmental factors.

Eventually, I stopped scheming to steal my records. I figured it wasn't the right time to find her, and that perhaps it was too late. She could already be dead, for all I knew. I thought of the years I'd followed my natural mother through her life—in my imagination---when I was convinced she walked around with a gaping hole that only her firstborn child could fill.

Throughout adolescence and puberty, I was sure my birth parents, if not still together, would be if their circumstances weren't so tragic. Before I moved to Florida and encountered the brick wall of sealed records, I was still hopeful. You see the heart-wrenching details of lover/parent/child separations all the time on *Unsolved Mysteries*, a show I watched with fascination in my twenties and thirties, as when a military man would fall in love with a woman overseas during the war, and then get separated by a

bombing in South Korea; or a lieutenant, not suspecting he's soon to be a father, receives orders to ship out to another war zone, where he is killed; or he survives, but his tour ends and he's back in the States. After he is gone, the woman finds out she's pregnant. Of course, they still loved each other, even when they had been separated by an argument or war. I didn't know the timing was off by a couple of years for my birth parents to be separated by Vietnam, but in any event, an honorable military background was usually involved. According to Momma, the nurses had speculated that my natural father was probably stationed at the Spokane Army base.

I always had a miraculously smooth explanation for the partings: if it wasn't lost love, it was unrequited love. Sometimes the pregnant couple's parents would forbid them to marry, as in the case of Charles, my father's brother, whom I'd heard Mom gossiping about. He enlisted in the Navy and spent two years overseas, where he purportedly fell in love with a Japanese girl. He wrote to his mother, telling her he was in love, and she wrote back that he had better not bring any foreign girls home to *her*. Uncle Charles never did marry. I often wondered if he had kept a picture of her, but didn't dare ask; besides, I didn't need an image of my birth family to remind me of their existence, and they wouldn't need one of me to remember.

After receiving my non-identifying information, I reasoned, as Momma repeatedly warned, that my birth mother might not wish to meet me. While *Unsolved Mysteries* rarely aired shows with rejection scenarios, some of the talk shows I watched and articles I'd read had addressed a birthparent's denial of giving up a child, for fear that the revelation would destroy his or her present family. Perhaps fate, or God, was

mercifully sheltering me from a sorrowful outcome. What if she did have children and a closed-minded husband who were unaware that she'd given a baby girl up for adoption? The last thing I wanted was to turn her life upside down because of my selfishness. And what if she rejected me a second time? I figured that my birthmother, a plump, maternal-type woman, was probably not married to my natural father. His race had been listed as unknown on the form. Did that mean my birthmother didn't know who he was? If so, how could he know I was born? His image transformed from a Robert Redford type to a blurry outline, faceless, roaming the countryside, oblivious to my existence.

Nine years after I'd begun the search, I came close to believing it was over. The internet had opened a wide door of communication I had never dreamed of, and I posted my profile on several of the adoption search sites: "Adoptee born 9/14/62 in Spokane, Washington, searching for birth family."

I received an e-mail message from a woman named Terri who had read my profile on one of the sites. "I think we might be sisters," Terri wrote.

Terri's natural parents had borne a daughter out of wedlock around September 1962. Her parents had later married and begun a new family, but had never tried to find their lost child. Terri, with her mother's reluctant blessing, decided to search for her full-blooded sibling.

Terri was hopeful. *The methods of providing non-identifying information have changed in Washington State, Terri wrote. Non-identifying information can be anything from a single form, like you received several years ago, to the actual court file. With the*

names and dates blacked out, of course. After a few days of scrabbling together online for the correct Washington Clerk's numbers to call, she had written to Vital Records and was waiting for a response. She encouraged me to do the same. I balked, afraid of again being denied my records. I also clung to the idea that Terri's records would confirm we were related. In the meantime, we exchanged school photos back and forth. *When I saw your picture, it looked familiar, she wrote, but I've never seen you before. Could it be?*

I wrote back, *You have those blue eyes, and those two incisors that grew in crooked, just like me.* She sent a photograph of her parents, and while I couldn't see any resemblance to the petite, dark-haired lady, I imagined I had the father's chin and cheekbones. Terri had a pet cockatiel named Cuddles. I had a cockatiel named Coco. It was too strange to be a coincidence. I'd write, *What did Cuddles whistle today?* She'd e-mail, *Is Coco still learning to say Where's the Kitty?*

I was thrilled with the idea of a sister, particularly one who could relate to the mysterious biological underpinnings that made finding our natural relatives seem a life or death matter. I burned with a desire to know not only whether diabetes or heart disease ran in my blood family, but also who these people were when I was born, and who they had become. I also wanted to let them know *I've turned out just fine, thank you,* even though the nagging feeling of displacement had shadowed my identity.

I also revealed, while I hadn't included it on my online profile, that I'd had a little brother, Mikey, adopted two years after me, whom my parents had relinquished back to foster care. My parents decided they couldn't afford to institutionalize him, and couldn't risk his staying in the home with me, since his temper tantrums grew increasingly violent.

I hoped, with a successful search for my birthmother, that it would open the door to finding Mikey.

Terri and I hoped for reassurance that our siblings had been placed with the right families, and had flourished, despite of, or perhaps because of, our parents' decisions to relinquish custody of their children.

Terri lived in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho, thirty-two miles from the Washington border and an hour's drive from Spokane, where I was born; I hadn't visited there since my birth. Momma always refused to take me. She always had some excuse, but I knew it was because she feared we'd run straight into my biological past.

Terri described Spokane, writing that the population had tripled since the sixties, growing from a fur trading town to a busy metropolis with the addition of the Northern Pacific Railroad and the 1974 World's Fair. She told me how the seemingly never-ending rain would shimmer across the sky, except when it was cold enough to snow, when the whole city would be a bundle of golden lights against a blanket of white. And did I know that Spokane was an Indian word meaning "children of the sun"? The Spokane River, she said, looked like a plate of silver on calm, sunny days, despite the pollution that progress had brought. I had so many questions, which I tried not to bombard her with all at once. I asked her if something tragic had happened during 1989. She wrote a short note back, *Why do you ask?* I explained that was the year I had felt that something was wrong, that I needed to find my birthmother.

My brother, Billy, committed suicide in March, 1989, she wrote, explaining that part of what fueled her search was her pain, her brother's absence. She wanted to find her

other sibling, alive, intact. *You must gather the courage to ask for your records*, she wrote. I was afraid, because I didn't believe that Terri's mother had actually forgotten the month that she had given birth to her firstborn; more likely, she really didn't want her to be found. If we were sisters, I'd have to reconcile the fact that her mother hadn't really wanted to find me. *But she'll warm up to me*, I thought, *once she realizes that I'm her daughter*.

A week into our daily correspondence, I discovered Terri's search was much more complex, as mine was. She admitted that she wasn't just searching for a sister, but also for a son she'd given up for adoption in Idaho. She bore the guilt of giving up her first born son, and it made her crazy to not know where he was, whether he was safe—and if he'd been loved. *It must run in her family*, I thought. *Like mother, like daughter? Carrying on the tradition of giving a child conceived out of wedlock up for adoption?* I wondered if her mother had pressured her into giving up her child.

A few days later she told me the truth about her son, and the disclosure would haunt me for years. When she was twelve, a neighbor boy had raped her. *I was so dumb that I didn't figure out that I was going to have a baby until seven months into it*, she wrote.

At night I lay in bed, replacing my memories as a sister to Mikey, then an only child, to dreams of being a sister to Terri. I am twelve, she is ten, and we are trying to scare each other to death with ghost stories when a Seattle rainstorm has cut our electricity. We are roasting marshmallows in the fireplace, giggling as our parents yell at us to be careful and not set the house on fire.

I wondered about our similar traits, which I refused to view as common and coincidental, like having strawberry birthmarks on the back of our necks, trying to hide our shyness, taking long walks in the woods, loving pet birds, having tender hearts easily trampled. We didn't need to see the other's tears while we tapped on our computers to know that we were both crying for years of nagging feelings of displacement in our lives—Terri grieving for a sister and son who belonged in her life, a sister and birth parents who belonged in mine. Would we have fought a lot, as I'd seen other siblings do, or been more like friends, sharing a bedroom, exploring creeks, and playing *Barbies* together? Neither one of us, though, was willing to voice these daydreams of what could have been, even if it had turned out we were sisters.

Less than two months later, we finally found the contact number to call and request our birth records. I gave social services a call. While I waited for a response, Terri received her sister's original birth certificate on March 5. Her sister was born in Seattle, not Spokane, in March, rather than September as Terri's mother had claimed. Still, we weren't sure—Terri had recently learned that it was common practice for the state adoption agencies to add a few days, months, even a year, to the altered birth certificate, along with the adoptive parents' names listed as the birthparents. However, her sister's blood type, which was B negative, confirmed I couldn't be her sister: mine was A positive.

Our conversations dropped off because neither one of could bear the false certainty we had constructed that we shared a biological link, and we both needed to move forward with our searching. I often wondered whether she met her sister, but I

would never know. Despite earlier e-mails about her husband supporting and encouraging her search, Terri's marriage had been disintegrating, and she warned me that she'd have no internet access for some time. She was moving to conceal her whereabouts from her estranged husband. In one of her last e-mails, she told me she'd found her son, who was a troubled young man. She cryptically added that his adoptive family environment had been less than ideal, and she was trying to help him by reestablishing their mother/son relationship. She wouldn't elaborate, and since she wouldn't have internet access, our long-distance relationship ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Three days after Terri received her sister's birth certificate, my records arrived. The shadows were growing shorter on a calm, sunny March afternoon on my pool deck as I grasped the thick manila envelope tightly against my chest, watching a pair of cardinals flit from the orange tree to the birdfeeder. I'd believe the years of searching had come to fruition when I actually read the documents inside. *The winner takes it all...the loser has to fall.* I had thought ABBA's lamenting seventies pop song lyrics meant everything as I drank and mourned my mysterious past, my failed relationships, my inability to play the game and win.

I released the thick package, relishing the satisfying weight of my birth history as it slapped onto my lap, even as I feared the contents could be another dead end. I slowly peeled up the adhesive flap. Drawing out an inch-thick pile of papers clasped with a binder clip, I stared at the pristine, thick bond paper with a bright green heading from Washington State Social Services. Apparently, my friendly chats with the clerks in

Washington, when I lied and told them I needed to verify whether Terri was my sister, had paid off. Enclosed, the letter said, was all the non-identifying information about my adoption, including my birth family's history, birth and hospitalization records, and adoptive parents' information. Names, birth dates, etc., blacked out, of course. My *history*.

I went back in the time before and leading up to my birth. The crisp court documents danced between my fingers as the details of my maternal ancestors came alive, for me, for the first time since the court had sealed my biological identity. I was reborn. My birthmother's first name was Sheila. And her story wasn't pretty.

Most of the documents were the case worker's typed reports about my unwed mother, Sheila, with her last name and birth dates blacked out. There were motions and orders that rescinded the birth mother's right as a juvenile parent and granted my parents custody. Their last names were also blacked out. The first court document was entitled *THE CHILD*, with a category indicating I was a healthy, normal baby, other than some oddly shaped toes. The bottom paragraph caught my eye:

History: Pamela's mother, Sheila, came from a family which provided very little in the way of emotional security and had a very low cultural environment. There was a long public assistance history with several siblings of the mother's family, made wards of the court. Sheila was herself quite promiscuous and when she became pregnant she entered _____ Hospital with the intent of relinquishing her baby. This was done one week after the baby's birth, when Sheila appeared in juvenile court.

Sheila, who was fifteen years old, had been closely scrutinized by the state agency workers and had been questioned repeatedly about the “putative” father. She had brown hair, blue eyes, lovely skin, and attractive features--just as I had always imagined. She was the same height as me—five feet, six inches. She weighed one hundred and eighty-five pounds. I was taken aback that my idea of her appearance, other than weight, were on target, though these details were small in the face of struggles I could never have dreamed: Her ability in school was “probably” average, and her grades were C’s and D’s in high school. The caseworkers speculated repeatedly that her “stilted environment” played a large part in her low performance, and wondered how the children (Sheila and her six siblings) had stayed in school at all. In another report, perhaps by a different social worker, Sheila “would be attractive except for the fact that she is terribly obese.”

I hurled the document across the patio table, where it slid and wilted over the rounded edge. I was annoyed with the stereotypical labels of the sixties. If she weighed one-eighty-five, I calculated, she couldn’t have been over forty or so pounds overweight. By today’s standards, she was not obese. The staleness of the social worker’s judgments of my birthmother poisoned me. I could only pause, close my eyes, shake my head, and pace up and down the warm concrete pool deck. Occasionally I walked across the lawn, past the birdfeeder, rounding the side of the house. I wanted to shrink inside myself, leaning up against the house as straight as I could, as if eventually I would just blend into the sunlit stucco. Then, creeping back to my patio chair, I would read again.

In another area, *Placement of the Child* caught my eye. I was placed in a foster home six days after my birth with a childless couple at a board rate of three dollars per

day. After that, instead of referring to me as “Baby Girl _____,” the social workers called me Donna, both confirming what Momma had told me about the name, but negating the fact that the nurses had named me. Momma had skipped over the fact that I had lived with a foster family; they were the ones who had named me Donna.

There was a tender side to the records, when Momma and Daddy, the potential adoptive parents, had first visited me at three weeks old. It was comforting to be able to summon their familiar faces and personalities—and they had been “delighted” with me, according to the report. “Donna was good throughout their visit...the adoptive mother seemed very warm and relaxed with her, and as the adoptive father stood by, obviously very pleased as he let his wife assume responsibility for the baby...there was no question they were pleased with the child.”

While the agency’s report carried the curious tone of reporting their customers’ satisfaction with their purchase, the passage confirmed my parents’ devotion, as well as their roles in my life. Momma had always been the active parent, and the spokesperson, for both of them. I thought of how reticent Daddy had always seemed when I read that, when I was just a month old, the social worker reported, how Daddy had kept “everyone amused at his place of business (with) his details of how efficient he is as a father.”

Of course he had been proud. He’d just never voiced it. For some reason, I thought of his corny sense of humor. When I was a teenager, and Dad learned that I loved poetry, he’d repeat, “Damn, Pam, Damn, Pam,” grinning at his clever rhyming. This was my father, the one who seemed distant but easygoing, the one whom I could depend upon, reach out and touch if I wished. I clung to the familiar, the parents I’d watched and

imitated growing up while reading about the family I'd been searching for, written from the perspective of an overworked social worker who had presented nothing but frank judgments and detached, disturbing facts to absorb. I would have to find a way to weave the hereditary and environmental facts of my existence together.

While my medical records indicated that at three weeks I was down two pounds from my birth weight, and had some sort of shoulder problem from an injury, there was no entry confirming this had been shared with my parents. Also embedded in the entry of our first visit was a comment:

Worker told the family about the little problems noted with Donna, none of which appeared too significant at this time (green stools and a bead-sized hole above her navel.

I re-read the passage. Green stools and hole above the navel? This hadn't been mentioned under the information about *The Child*. I flipped back to my medical history, where the attending physician had written that the small hole above my navel could develop into a hernia and possibly interfere, later, with bearing children. I pulled up my shirt and looked at my stomach. No hole, but I saw a slightly pale-colored area above my navel that seemed to stretch out like a tiny starfish.

Interesting to find out how much someone was paid to take care of you and how you'd lost weight instead of gained it when you were wrenched from your mother just minutes after leaving your warm, liquid home in the womb of a neglected, pregnant fifteen-year-old who loved swimming, cooking, and drawing. Funny how you had always

had pain and stiffness in your right shoulder but never knew why, and still didn't, exactly. Troubling, that you'd never been able to conceive.

I hesitated when I saw the heading about my natural father, watching leaves and debris swirl in the sparkling pool before being sucked to the bottom. Then I read the brief summary:

Father: The putative father was described as being about 5' 8" in height and weighing about 150 pounds. He had brown hair and eyes. The mother knew very little else about him. Actually, since she knew so little, the whole question of paternity is so clouded that the agency wondered if she actually even knew who the father was.

I drank in the dry, Xeroxed paper, page after page with occasionally blacked out information that I'd sought for over three decades. Only when the information began to repeat itself did I allow one of the most dreadful times in my biological, maternal family's history to sink in. I felt sorry I felt for this girl, who had been "sneaking out" at night, which wasn't really sneaking, since her parents were always at the bars. They hadn't cared what she was doing. The facts were increasingly grim: Sheila had three older, and three younger, siblings. One of her older sisters was receiving public assistance for three *illegitimate* children she had borne out of wedlock. An older brother had been constantly in trouble with the law. The agency saw "signs" that Sheila's father had venereal disease. Sheila's mother had herself been "promiscuous." The three younger children had already been made Wards of the Court, being placed at least once under foster care.

There was one redeeming moment, according to the social worker: an older sister had joined the military, had not borne children out of wedlock, and appeared to have become a productive member of society.

The neat stack of perspectives and notions that I had built with my years of searching didn't prepare me for the truth of how complicated, how textured, the truth was: daughter born out of wedlock: daughter given away: daughter assuming new identity; a mother who wanted me and a juvenile who apparently didn't; an adoptive background with no alcoholism; one with active alcoholism, unbeknownst to the adoptive parents; a young girl who was overweight, neglected, and dismissed as promiscuous. Two families, and those extending outward, completely changed as a result of Sheila's unplanned pregnancy.

All those years, the dreams had been about me, the fantasy reunion—the search that fueled my spirit and my faith. But now, I grieved for this young, lost girl who had grown up in an alcoholic family. I could have easily been a part of that family. Suddenly, it was about how she had survived and whether I would have survived had she raised me, or if I would have landed in a perpetual chain of foster homes. Being surrounded by active alcoholics, could I have ever gotten sober? And how would my parents react to the news that I had this bit of biological history? Would they feel rejected when they learned I was unveiling the mystery of my biological past? The unsealed documents plucked at the threads of who I thought I was.

On the third day of poring over my file, I saw it. February 17, 1945. Sheila's birthday. She would have just turned fifty-four years old. Had the clerk just *happened* to forget to black out Sheila's birthdate?

For thirty dollars, an online public records search yielded three matches in the United States with my birth mother's first name and birth date. I spent another sleepless night, roaming the house. I kept envisioning a shadowy figure, a creamy, blurred face surrounded by light brown hair, a plump, motherly body.

The crickets on a muggy April evening were shrilly buzzing, the frogs croaking by the pool, too loud against the darkness. At midnight I gave up trying to sleep and sat down with the search results again. Armed with three possible Sheilas, I considered Sheila Welch, Fort Lauderdale. Too good to be true, since I lived just down the coast. Sheila Noonan Thill, *Greenbrae, California*. Didn't sound quite right. Sheila Rochelle Brickey, *Coos Bay, Oregon*. Oregon was my husband's favorite state; it felt right that she would migrate to Oregon, not California or Florida.

I don't recall looking up the numbers of the first two women—but I had written the Oregon number next to her listing. Around midnight, I calculated that it would be ten on the west coast. I fiddled around in the garage, trying not to wake my husband. What was she like? How would poor, unprivileged child have grown? Had she overcome her childhood, or did her life echo the tradition of her alcoholic parents? The crickets droned in the background of my rapid pulse as I dialed the number.

“Hello?” she answered. Her voice sounded soft and no-nonsense all at once. No southern twang that I was accustomed to hearing in the Midwest. It reminded me of the crisp, clear dialect I remembered from my childhood in Washington. The conversation began awkwardly.

Hello. I’m looking for Sheila Brickey.

This is she. Who is this?

Hi. My name is, uh, Pamela Toner, and I’m wondering—were you born in Spokane?

No.

Stupid, I think. For God’s sake, I’ve waited for this my whole life, and I don’t even know the right questions to ask. But there’s a slight lilt to her no. Not a questioning tone, not an annoyed tone. Too calm. She sounds dignified. I feel I can hear her draw in her breath through the earpiece. She is waiting for me to continue. I try again, leaning against the cool, hard enamel of the dryer in the garage.

Uh, what I mean to say is, I was born in Spokane, and I’m looking for my birthmother.

You were born in Spokane, then?

Yes. I was born September 14. I’m looking for my birthmother.

As she paused, I closed my eyes, praying that she wouldn’t say *You’ve got the wrong number* or *I don’t know what you’re talking about*.

I’ve waited a long time for this call.

So have I.

CHAPTER THREE: GARDENS

In early spring, 1997, I was dating my future husband, trying to decide if I wanted to become not only a wife, but a stepmother to Mike's daughter. I drove over to his house to see him and his daughter, Ashley, who was visiting for the weekend. Ashley was a cherubic six-year-old, sitting in a flower bed of freshly turned soil, planting flowers, her cheeks dimpled with smiles. She had her father's hazel eyes, his round cheeks, his chin, his nose, his cinnamon freckles, just like all of Mike's sisters and nieces. She was wearing a straw-rimmed hat decorated with silk roses. In one of her chubby hands she clutched a white gardening shovel, ready to plant a clump of pink periwinkles.

Watching Ashley, I remembered myself as a toddler in a wilderness of flowers, leaning over a red and white one, pinwheel like, and reaching out to pick it. Then, Lady, my father's bird dog, was yanking me back by the yellow ruffled hem of my sundress. I cried over the unpulled flower, and when Lady let go, I ran to Momma, who was rounding the corner of the house.

I don't remember reaching the safety of her arms, but I have a photograph from that moment. Momma is drying her hands on a dishtowel, wearing a sleeveless blue gingham-checked dress that she whirred out on her Singer sewing machine, along with the lacy yellow apron tied around her waist. She is smiling at me, her tow-headed, disgruntled child.

That spring day, her garden is in full bloom, her adopted daughter is healthy and active, and Momma hasn't yet succumbed to the fear that her child will be plucked from her grasp.

Later, Momma would tell me the flowers I remembered had bloomed from a roll-out seed mat that she ordered from a catalog. The seeds came sealed, gently, between layers of gauzy wood fiber-filled fabric that retained moisture. They were evenly distributed to increase the odds of a color-balanced garden. The layered mat even acted as a weed barrier during germination and early growth of the flowers. It was like my adoption: cell to embryo, fetus to orphan, then planted with Momma and Daddy.

I kneeled down next to Ashley, who was not yet fully formed or developed, but on her way, soaking in the Florida sun and earth, planting a flower garden. Within a year, she'd have another maternal figure—a stepmother, adding to the nature and nurture mix. I wondered how much of her personality, of her future was laid out by the traits she had inherited from her parents—who she was meant to be, and how much my influence would change or shape her.

After Mike and I married, I spent many sleepless nights roaming the house, wondering about my birthmother as I had always done. *Did she have other children? Did she wonder about me while she watched them sleeping? Was she even still living?* Back then, Ashley's room was often empty since she primarily lived with her mother. I'd creep into her room during the nights she wasn't there and slip under her pastel-striped comforter, inhaling the mingled scents of bubblegum and baby shampoo, staring at the glowing fluorescent moons and stars that Ashley had pasted to the ceiling. I wondered what Ashley

thought of me as a stepmother. When I was nine or ten, I had both loved and despised my mother: adored her when she read books to me or took me to the ice cream shop for a milkshake; hated her when she yelled and slapped me across the face. I hated that I was expected to constantly reassure Momma of my love, given my knowledge that another woman, not her, had been pregnant with me. At times, I was ashamed of her but couldn't put into words why, at the same time, I craved her approval. She was the parent I depended on.

I could never lay such a guilt trip on Ashley, trying to make her swear allegiance to only one mother. As I closed my eyes and hugged her pillow, I wished I could caress her long golden-brown hair and listen to her say her prayers. I also yearned to curl up in my birth mother's arms and fall asleep. I was caught in the middle: wanting to be a mother, but longing to be a daughter to my birthmother. Surely she thought of me at night, in the darkness of her room, wherever she was.

Over the years, I have watched Ashley grow, bandaged her scrapes and cuts, and spent hours in the emergency room when she fell off her bicycle, ran into the sliding glass doors, dressers, and even a boat propeller. "She's accident-prone, like me," I boasted to my parents during long distance phone conversations. "She makes straight A's and likes to draw just like me," I told my husband. I was conscious of the threads of pride that laced my tone, that Ashley carried some of my traits, and I remembered Momma's similar delight one day at the optometrist's office when I was eight. He diagnosed me as nearsighted. "She definitely inherited your eyes," he said. Her face lit up, and she laughed a little, sharing a

look with me, one that became our private joke when a stranger would comment on our similarities, or say that I was certainly my mother's daughter.

I have cradled Ashley in my arms to calm her, smoothing her hair and spirit when she was frightened. I've issued timeout orders when she misbehaved, worrying that she'd label me the wicked stepmother; coaxed her to eat foods other than pizza and peanut butter; cried as her father and I watched her school plays; empathized and reasoned with her when she was angry. I have told her how much I love her. I've thanked her mother for trusting me as a step-parent, and although Mike's ex-wife hadn't the choice, for allowing me the honor of being a part of her daughter's life. And I would fiercely protect Ashley even if it meant my death.

But I didn't spend nine months wondering if the baby was a boy or girl, planning and purchasing a crib for her nursery. I didn't listen to my favorite musical artists like Fleetwood Mac, Rachmaninoff, and Johnny Cash to transfer a variety of musical tastes and the layers of hope and love I felt. I didn't spend hours in labor giving birth. I didn't choose her beautiful name, Ashley Ann. This baby didn't suck milk from my breast. I didn't buy a baby book and record her first tooth, or when she could hold her head up on her own, or what date she began to crawl. I didn't witness her walking for the first time or hear her first words.

Two years after I watched Ashley plant her garden, I made a resolution to look for my birthmother using online adoption search sites that had cropped up. One morning, while I was standing in my pajamas and bare feet in our sunny kitchen, I became lightheaded. I

rested my forehead against the cool white wall near the phone, listening to the rapid beat of my heart. I'd experienced the same feeling years earlier when I decided to actively search. I knew it was again time to try.

That evening, Mike and I discussed hiring a Washington attorney to assist me with unsealing my birth and adoption records. My new husband was intrigued by my lost family and supportive of my decision to search, having sat with me through numerous crying jags when re-runs of *Unsolved Mysteries* featured adoptee/birth parent reunions.

Ashley was also intrigued by my adoption and the planned search. "So you were an orphan? Why did she give you up? Why do you want to find her? What about Grandma and Grandpa?" she asked. I was aware that I needed to tread carefully; while I had never tried to take the place of her mother when she was with us, I was her stepmother. She also had two half-siblings from her mother's previous marriage, in addition to several sets of step-grandparents. So I wrote a short story called "Roxy's Family" and asked Ashley if she would illustrate the book for me. It began:

Roxy was sitting at her desk at school one day, watching her second grade teacher, Ms. Likens. Ms. Likens had light brown hair, blue eyes, and a clear, creamy complexion. Roxy did, too, and she secretly wondered if Mrs. Likens could be her real mother, who had given her up at birth.

Roxy ended up kicking pebbles on her way home, wondering about the word "adopted." She knew her cat had been adopted from the animal shelter—because she had been separated from her cat parents and abandoned by the owners. Had Roxy, too, been homeless and abandoned? She entered the kitchen, where her dark-haired mother was stirring a boiling pot of spaghetti. *Is Ms. Likens my real mom?* she asks. *No*, her mother

says, hugging her. *And we loved you from day one. Never were you abandoned.* Roxy is relieved, smiling and skipping off to feed the cat (according to Ashley's crayon drawing.) Roxy decides that she loves her adopted cat more than anything. How could she have questioned it? Finally, her father comes home, tickling her and calling her princess.

The final crayon drawing shows a family unit—plus a black and white cat—the father has red hair and mustache, like Mike. Roxy, of course, looks like Ashley. The “adoptive” mother, though, didn't have the dark hair described in the story. The mother had shoulder-length, reddish-blond hair—a blended version of Ashley's mother and me. Roxy's story was a fairy tale, and Ashley saw through parts of it. While one of Roxy's mothers was absent, Ashley had two that she could identify. But while Ashley never lost her parents, she had, in a way, lost the father that used to live with her natural mother.

Still, the smiling crayon faces were hopeful. Ashley knew it wasn't really her story. It was mine.

CHAPTER FOUR: FLIGHT PATTERNS

Icarus, my son, I charge you to keep at a moderate height, for if you fly too low the damp will clog your wings, and if too high the heat will melt them. Keep near me and you will be safe.

- from a Greek fable as told by Thomas Bullfinch

Until she was seven, my cockatiel, Percy, laid egg after unfertilized egg in the back corner of the cage, her delicate yellow and gray mingled feathers plumped like a chicken's. She brooded fiercely, defending her paper-towel lined nest at the cage bottom. My husband's and stepdaughter's searching fingers were greeted with a hiss and bite from her sharp beak. Not even I, who had tamed and raised Percy, dared to stick a hand into her domain.

I had recently moved out of my townhouse and into my husband Mike's home, ending eighteen years of living single and a decade of living with only pet birds. I was thirty-five and childless except for my stepdaughter; at times, though, my barrenness seemed to pale in significance to Percy's hatchling-less situation. Even though she would have needed a male to fertilize the eggs, she couldn't know this, and simply had the instinct to bring her clutch to fruition. Perhaps she felt a sense of powerlessness in her unfulfilled instincts, wrought by my betrayal, which bred despair.

Whenever Percy nurtured and warmed her eggs, she became scrawny and thin, and this time was no different. She took a break only for a drink of water and a nibble of millet seed. I distracted her daily, coaxing her out of the cage with *Cheerios* and placing her on

the kitchen counter in front of a water-filled cereal bowl in which to bathe and refresh herself. After a few weeks, while she was bathing, I tiptoed back into the family room, out of her view, and removed the warm, unfertilized eggs before they began to rot. I guiltily carried her back to the cage, where she paced the bottom, tearing at the paper towel liner, searching for her missing eggs. I acted surprised. "Oh Percy, I'm sorry. Another bird must have taken them," I said. She hadn't actually seen me remove them, after all.

"Don't believe her, Percy. I saw Mommy take your eggs," my husband teased as I shooed him away.

I couldn't know to what extent she mourned the lost eggs. Sometimes she seemed relieved that her burden had been removed, climbing to the top of the cage, ready to play; other times she would intermittently peer at the eggless corner, chew on her cuttlebone and drink the calcium powder I sprinkled in her water. Soon, she would start the egg-laying process all over again. This time, Percy ignored the absent eggs, settling on the top of the cage to preen her feathers.

Cockatiels are the only species in their genus, *Nymphicus hollandicus*, named after a group of travelers from Holland who saw them in the deserts of Australia, where they soared through the arid land and hovered near water sources, appearing nymph-like, with their slender, pointed wings and tails. The Hollanders thought them so beautiful and graceful that they named them after the nymphs, who are known in Greek mythology as female nature spirits, sometimes bound to a particular location or land form. Cockatiels are the only cockatoo species that can breed in their first year, and I had barely tamed Percy before she produced her first batch of eggs.

When I was single, I had used a cage perch to teach Percy to hop on my finger, echoing the method I had used with the parakeets, gently nudging the rounded wood against her breastbone, coaxing her to step up. “Good bird,” I’d whisper. I spent hours trying to train her to talk and whistle. After she reluctantly crawled on my finger, I slowly walked to the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, lights out, to keep Percy from becoming distracted. I whistled and repeated phrases for an hour each evening. She listened quietly, head cocked, perched on my finger.

She never did learn words or tunes; female cockatiels are not predisposed to talk. The male birds are most likely to learn to communicate creatively with their vocal cords because of their need to attract the females. When I climbed the creaking steps to my apartment after a long day of work, she issued wild, carefree chirping sounds, similar to the calls she made when fluttering around the apartment. But when it stormed, the rain rumbling like a train drumming across the roof, she grew quiet at first, then issued subdued, pensive chirps, dwindling to low cheeping sounds, and the parakeets sounded off questioning whistles. The changes in pitch of an alarmed bird are not easy to describe, since bird calls and song do not correspond to the pitch in musical scales. Percy’s scared tone had a high to low shakiness within one note, a sort of *dimmuendo*, or like a human’s voice shaking while giving a speech. I always knew when she was frightened, and offered her a forefinger. As she slowly, one cautious toe at a time, gripped her skin-covered perch, I drew her close to me, kissing her soft, bony breast and placing her in the crook of my neck so she could hide in my hair.

Percy and I engaged in long conversations even though she couldn't speak. She responded to my tone of voice and gesturing, and cocked her head and stared at me with one dark, round eye as if she understood. "Are you the prettiest bird?" Percy squinted an eye toward the ceiling as if there were never any doubt. "Of course you are," I crooned as she shrilly chirped in what my opinion was obvious agreement, then started to groom me by picking off any whiteheads or other foreign-looking specks she could find on my chin. When I gently brushed her away from my face, she dipped her beak into her tail where her oil gland was located, using the lubrication to preen her feathers.

Patience is letting a bird bite your nose and remaining perfectly still, while the tiny hole from the sharp end of her beak stings and bleeds, because you know she's instinctively defending herself. You can't bite back, or strike, or yell, for fear of further frightening her. While cockatiels are descendents of the cockatoo, Percy was a miniature version of the larger, pale-colored bird, who could snap your nose clean off with its huge, powerful beak rather than just leaving behind a small hole that would trickle blood. It was her instinct when she felt threatened. Luckily for both of us, she learned to be gentle when near my face. She loved it when I scratched her head and neck, and let me play with the crest of long feathers that sprouted from her crown like a chieftain's headdress. She allowed me to take her scrawny, down-coated neck and yellow head between my fingers, closing her eyes while I rubbed the delicate green-gray speckled feathers camouflaging the vertebrae around her head. I carefully brushed my fingertips across the bright orange circle of auricular feathers that protected her tiny ear holes. Patience begets trust. With that trust comes responsibility not to betray it.

Percy was not my first bird, just as Mike wasn't my first serious relationship. I had two other pet birds. Danny, a cobalt blue male parakeet, was a twenty-sixth birthday gift from Brenda, a friend I'd made at the law office where we worked as legal secretaries.

When I first met Brenda, she turned pale and ignored me when I walked by her desk. I knew she was busy, but I also suspected she was snubbing me, either because I was new on the block or my budding affair with my boss had leaked. But when I gathered with the other secretaries in the lunchroom, or paused on the stairs as we clacked up and down the two-story office building, they whispered that if Brenda looked like she'd seen a ghost when I came into view, it was close to the truth: I resembled Patty, Brenda's dead daughter. The secretaries whispered that Brenda's son-in-law, a violent crack addict, had shot Brenda's only daughter. He then turned the gun on himself. Brenda, concerned that Patty and her husband hadn't returned her phone calls for three days, drove to their trailer home. Inside, she found her daughter's infant son crawling around the floor in his young parents' blood. They all speculated on how the baby hadn't starved, or slipped face down and drowned.

So Brenda and I began to forge an odd relationship of reciprocal mourning. Although our circumstances were drastically unlike, we both felt the dagger-tipped loss of our old lives, before drugs and alcohol had permanently altered our futures, before the death of an old life that should have turned out so differently. I told her about my short-lived, violent marriage to a drug addict, and how glad I was to have left before he killed me. She, in turn, only mentioned the murder and suicide once.

“Have you ever seen brain tissue?” she asked me one day. I said I hadn’t, and tried to envision biology class models of the intact brain. “It’s gray, and the bone is off-white—that is, the parts not covered in blood,” she said.

I spent a lot of time at Brenda’s home curled up on her plush sofa, sipping coffee, and listening to her advice about men and birds while she drank vodka. Brenda had a Lutino cockatiel named Feather, who was perky, plump and bright yellow. As Feather perched and cuddled on her shoulder, Brenda assured me that the smaller birds, like parakeets and cockatiels, were low maintenance, loyal pets. Give them a clean cage, birdseed, water, and some affection and they were content. I, in turn, tried to persuade her to give up drinking and enjoy her grandson, Bobbie, but she’d wave my suggestions away with a whisk of her hand. Besides, wasn’t I lonely during my on again, off again relationship with Brice, my boss? Didn’t I need a distraction until he got his divorce? Brenda shook her short, pineapple-colored hair dyed to match not only the color of Feather, but also her screaming yellow convertible Mustang. She stood behind the kitchen counter and poured another quick drink before her husband got home. She blinked her glassy, ocean-blue eyes.

“You need something to *love*,” she said. “To drive away the loneliness. And the memories.” She lowered her eyes to the tinkling glass of vodka on the rocks with a splash of lemonade, and she reminded me of a tall daisy wilting in the sun, reaching to the sky only when the rain had drenched its roots.

Although she wouldn't take my advice and stop drinking, I finally agreed to hers, but told her I needed to start out small, with a budgerigar, commonly called a parakeet. I wasn't entirely sure that I could take care of anything other than myself.

At first, Danny screeched and screamed when I opened his cage. After I finally taught him to step on my finger, he hopped to my shoulder and burrowed into my long hair. If I kept my hands and body still, he wouldn't scream; but at the slightest movement, he flew back to his cage, shrieking as if a hawk were chasing him. He did learn to whistle, after I spent long, patient hours in the darkness of my bedroom reciting *pretty bird, hello baby*, and variations of the wolf whistle. I purchased a bird song tape to keep him company while I was at work. He showed his personality in many ways, and one of the most endearing traits was that he had certain musical preferences, chirping along to the mellow sounds of Elton John and Jimmy Buffet, scolding at the loud bass and high notes of *Van Halen* and *AC/DC*.

Brenda eventually quit the law firm to raise her grandson, Bobby, who was by then four years old with blonde hair and limpid brown eyes. The physicians had diagnosed him with attention deficit disorder, and his jumpy restlessness and short attention span were probably a result of fetal alcohol syndrome. On Saturdays, I brought Danny in his cage to Brenda's house to play with Bobby in Brenda's sparkling, kidney-shaped pool. He always screamed, "T-Rex, T-Rex," signaling me to play his monster game. I folded my elbows close to my ribcage to mimic his favorite dinosaur's short forelegs and stomped clumsily around in the pool. One day, I shifted my stance, spreading my arms wide, swooping and screeching, explaining that I was a flying dinosaur, the Pterodactylus. Bobby paused in the

shallow end of the pool, clutching his pool ring, distracted from the game. “Pterodacts aren’t dinosaurs,” he said. “They are flying reptiles.”

He reminded me of Danny, my new parakeet, slightly damaged and high strung, but highly intelligent. So I both roared and screeched and pursued him, rocking his inflatable blue pool ring as he screamed in delight. At first, he pretended to duck; he had a fear of submerging his head. While this isn’t an uncommon phobia, I wondered if he recalled the confusion and nausea he must have felt floating in his mother’s cocaine and alcohol-flooded embryonic fluid. I swirled him high in my arms while Brenda smoked a cigarette and tinkled the ice in her lemon-flavored vodka, watching from her lounge chair.

“I’m too old for him,” Brenda said, and I understood that it wasn’t because she was forty-seven, but rather because her spirit had aged. When I was with Bobby, she sometimes stared through me with a half-smile, half-grimace on her face as if I were Patty. All I could think of was that I wasn’t ready for motherhood except for pet birds, but it felt good to have a clear head, knowing I wouldn’t have to worry about forgetting a child in the swimming pool or leaving him to fend for himself because I was drunk. Or end up like Patty.

A few months before my affair and job with Brice ended, Brenda moved down to Fort Lauderdale. I filled the gap by getting another bird, a pale blue, white breasted parakeet, to keep Danny company, naming him Dee Jay after a radio personality I’d dated briefly, before fleeing to the comfort of solitude and my pets. While I sat listening to their chatter, I read all the information available on the care and feeding of birds. Bred in captivity, budgies don’t mind the confines of a cage, but they prefer a cage or living area

that is flush with the corner of a room, so that two sides are always protected. This allows a reprieve from constantly watching their backs. In the Australian bush, they seek high, dense tree branches and hollows for nesting, but rely heavily on camouflage. They are social creatures, and tend to gather and travel in flocks with other indigenous birds, like cockatoos, parrots, and cockatiels.

I also learned to clip their wings and toenails after I witnessed a knowledgeable avian storeowner cut Danny's toenails until they bled. "Oh, they don't feel it," she said. But they did. They were winged creatures, not inanimate objects. Even though Danny shrieked when he saw the nail clippers in my hand, at least I didn't add the pain and injury of bleeding toes to the insult of grooming. Dee Jay was rather passive when I clipped his toenails and only tolerated me because he knew I'd return him to Danny, who eventually stopped talking. He didn't need to communicate with me any longer; he had a new, smaller friend he could pick on. The two male parakeets chattered and preened each other, barely acknowledging me as I came home from work. I would exercise obsessively to my aerobic tapes and fall exhausted to the floor, crying and pounding my fists on the soft carpet, both dreaming of and abhorring the thought of a drink, which would, at least temporarily, fill the hole created by my self-imposed isolation. I was taking a sabbatical from men, from co-workers, and from my sober acquaintances, because I couldn't risk getting attached to anyone.

Until Paul. Around the time my parakeets started ignoring me, I began dating Paul, who gave Percy, a female Cinnamon Pied-Pearl cockatiel, to me on my twenty-ninth birthday. I suspected he had bought Percy to keep my company during the four days of the

week he did not allow me to see him. The morning after we made love the first time, we were sitting in his truck listening to Scorpions' "Wind of Change." The melancholy sound of whistling and lyrics about burying the memory of distant past floated into the cab as he said, "I hope you don't expect that every night." His joking tone did not take the sting nor the truth out of his comment. I had the potential to interfere with his busy tree trimming business, regimented twelve-step meetings, and his long mourning period for the wife who took their droopy-eared dogs with her when she left him. Although he was single, he was nearly as inaccessible as Brice had been.

Percy was competitive for my attention, and at first disliked the parakeets, hissing and opening her mouth when they waddled over to her cage to investigate. I placed her large white cage in the living room corner, perpendicular to the parakeets' cage, as if the living room were a boxing ring. My friend Brenda's advice, not all of which I could find in the bird books, was like a bible: I kept my one-bedroom apartment with its swirly blue-gray toned carpeting and modest, Florida-style furniture trinket and clutter free. I was careful not to leave the balcony door open or expose the birds to the kitchen where I cooked with chemical-emitting Teflon skillets. I kept a box of cornstarch and Q-Tips within easy reach in case one of the birds busted a "blood feather." When the birds molted, sometimes a new feather would grow from a follicle in the bird's skin, and the quill would fill with blood. If the quill broke, the bird could bleed to death, and I would have to wet a Q-Tip, dip it into the cornstarch, and somehow apply it to the struggling, screeching bird's feather.

The cockatiel seemed to have more human characteristics than my childhood pets—which included two wild green parakeets, a cat, a poodle, and a longhaired

Chihuahua--probably because I spent more time observing and interacting with her. Percy was more affectionate and less skittish than the parakeets, who disliked being held. I loved kissing her soft grayish green feathers when I cradled her slender body and her tapered, tucked wings. She was a perfect fit in my loosely cupped palms and fingers; it felt like warming my hands on a down-coated coffee mug. Sometimes she would flutter her wings slightly, as if to remind me that she was allowing me to hold her, like a willingly captive miniature angel. Many cockatiels don't allow this type of handling unless tamed; she had been wild and untrusting, flapping and battering her wings against the slim cage bars, when Paul brought her into my apartment.

I had visited Brenda in her new Cooper City home near Ft. Lauderdale, traveling with my troop of three birds in their back seat cages. My trips soon tapered off, because she reminded me of my ill-fated relationship with Brice, and because she kept asking me if we'd gotten back together. "He's divorced now, you know," she'd say. I told her I had no intention of reigniting our relationship—it had been hard enough to let it go in the first place. I missed seeing Brenda, but never forgot her grief over her daughter, which kept me plodding past self-pity and despair. I was fortunate to be alive, sober, and tragedy-free, really. And I always remembered her advice about birds. Before she moved, Brenda had bought a green parakeet. "Don't forget the rule," she said. "Cockatiels and other larger birds believe they are superior to their smaller feathered friends. Don't let Percy peck the crap out of Danny."

By the time Paul and I broke up, and I had heard through the AA grapevine that he was drinking again, Percy had become more comfortable with perching on my shoulder. It was a sign of possessiveness, and in being nearly eye level, she felt equal, if not superior, to her human friend. When she was molting, she'd pick at the loose feathers, and dander would drift around us like a miniature snow storm. When the neighbors next door slammed cabinets or blared their stereo, Percy raised her royal crest of head feathers, cocked her head to look at my face, eyes alert in their shiny, mahogany-brown roundness, and I nodded. "They are noisy, aren't they?" I said in a soft voice as to not alarm her, and she ruffled her feathers, or chirped shrilly in my ear, indicating she wanted me to return her to the cage; it all depended on her mood.

She'd watch us in the bathroom mirror as I applied my makeup in the morning or removed it in the evening, pecking wet tongue kisses on her reflection. I'd been warned not to put mirrors in the cage, because she would grow too attached to the image of a like kind. I'd learned that lesson with the parakeets; even though they were both males, they acted like a crotchety married couple, pecking, preening, and scolding each other. I was single and determined that Percy remain so; she was my female companion.

Many domestic birds are in-bred for color variations, which can be a lucrative practice for bird breeders and pleasing to potential buyers, but the mutations compromise their immune systems. Percy's was weak, and she often fell ill, usually transmitting her cold or viral infection to the parakeets. They would all end up huddled and fluffed like feathery balls, clinging weakly to their perches as long as they could before crawling down to a corner of the cage. Both domesticated and wild birds hide illness to near death, even

pretending to eat and drink in order to present a mirage of health to their predators. Early on, I would get them to the vet in the nick of time. Over the years I learned to recognize the signs of illness and nurse them back to health by placing a heating pad near their cage to maintain eighty-five degrees, feeding them droppers full of medicine, half of which they'd flick stickily on my face. I became adept at handling them so I wouldn't get bitten, swaddling them in kitchen towels.

One rainy Florida October day after work, I went home to my apartment to find that Percy was still listless after weeks of antibiotics. I had already spent my meager extra cash taking care of my ill birds, and weeping, I once again drove to the veterinarian, charging to my sole credit card the seventy-five dollars to have Dr. Peck, an avian specialist, x-ray her. "Percy has an abnormally small liver," she said. She patted my shoulder and with a sympathetic smile told me that Percy's expected life span of fifteen to twenty years would be shortened. "Unfortunately, in-breeding results in organ deficiencies quite frequently." Then she straightened, pushing her wire-rimmed glasses further up on her nose as she continued to criticize the varied results of cross breeding. With a thirsty spirit of research twinkling in her eyes, she asked to conduct additional tests on Percy. At my expense, of course. I told her I'd think about it, intending nothing of the sort, as I clutched my cage and took Percy home. Percy wasn't an experiment. She was my life.

I wasn't dating at the time. My parents were in Oklahoma, and I was in Florida. The birds were all I had. Percy *would not* die. In some ways, I still lived under the illusion that I could make things happen by sheer will. I would take care of my own. You deal with it. No

matter the pain, if you love something and want to prolong that feeling, you have to wait out the pain, all the while accepting the consequences.

I cried as I left Percy nestled in the bottom of a heating pad-lined, perchless cage at the clinic for three nights so they could administer antibiotic injections and hand feed her until she was stronger. I must have called twenty times, receiving the news that she was steadily gaining back her strength. Dr. Peck had asked me numerous times whether I had given her any poisonous objects or metals in her cage. I always said no after scanning my living room, but as I stared at her empty cage the third day, I saw it: the lead sinker attached to a string, that a fellow bird owner and avid fisherman had made and given as a toy for Percy. I removed it and flung it into the garbage, calling the neighbor, who also had a cockatiel and was unaware of the danger. Like a mother scolding a careless babysitter who has left a bottle of open bleach within arm's reach of her toddler, I lectured him about the dangers of lead poisoning in such a small creature.

The next day, I retrieved a recovered Percy from the vet hospital. As I gently wrapped her in a soft towel to transport her to the car, the veterinarian clinic advertised that they would offer a fifty percent discount on all services for pet owners on Halloween. There was only one catch: All parties, including pets, must be costumed.

It wasn't only the savings that lured me to the clinic with my baby birds, as I thought of them. I had formed a bond with the vet, and especially the two assistants, Lisa and Linda, a scrawny-looking gay couple who had a plethora of dogs, cats, and birds. The two young women had cooed over Percy, Danny and Dee Jay. They trembled, tears glistening in their eyes, as they hugged and reassured me when the birds were ill. Even

though they were a couple, they understood my deep attachment as a single parent to my three babies, because they had also felt like needy outcasts who had lavished their sole affection on their pets before they found one another.

I was planning to attend my third alcohol-free party later in the evening at the civic center, hosted by my new group of sober friends, and had worked out an outfit in malicious celebration of my severed relationship with Brice. Before our final break-up, he had given me, as a typical gift, part of the get-up: a Frederick's of Hollywood French maid costume. I added a plain black dress underneath for modesty's sake, but it was almost as short as the original filmy negligee-type, white lace-ruffled apron I had placed over it. Costuming the birds was a dilemma, since the parakeets in particular were so tiny and fragile, and they didn't take kindly to something foreign obscuring their feathery bodies. My mother had a solution to the problem: she made each of them small satin capes, so they could go as bat birds and super birds.

So, on Halloween, I entered the jingling glass door to the clinic, juggling an umbrella and two cages, while a woman in a clown suit hastened to open the door. She was gripping two leashes. My birds froze, clinging to their perches in terror as they followed the leash to the end, where the lady held back two slobber-drooling Irish Setters with red and orange clown ruffles decorating their necks. The tiny reception area was a mad house. My face felt clammy as I carefully avoided the slobbering dogs and other creepily costumed people and pets and managed to set the cages on a bench without brushing it against my costume or ripping a hole in my fish net stockings.

Linda, one of the assistants, took a picture while I was trying to secure the loose ring of yarn that held the black, bat-embossed cloak onto Dee Jay, who was more complacent and too weak to do more than faintly flutter his wings. It was impossible to get Percy or Danny, who were screeching and indignantly biting my fingers, to hold still long enough for a snapshot. In the photo, the skin under my eyes is shadowed in a pale face, glowing against my black maid uniform as I hold my sky-blue parakeet in one palm while trying to hold the cape on with the other hand. Once she had her shot, Linda waved her hand. “Don’t worry about it, you’ll get the discount,” she said. “We don’t want to put any more stress on these babies.”

By the time I was dating my future husband, Mike, my parakeet Dee Jay died of a chest tumor. Even though I grieved, I hadn’t allowed myself to become as attached to my second parakeet as the others, partly because he needed Danny’s attention and not mine, but mostly because I was prepared for his death. Unlike the vet’s warnings about Percy’s dysfunctional liver, which I instinctually debunked, I believed that Dee Jay would live a short life because he was so small and weak. Before we married, Mike, who was loving toward all the birds, helped me bury him under the elephant ear philodendron in my backyard with a prayerful memorial. This was part of my attraction to him. My baggage was my beloved pets, and I always gauged potential boyfriends by how they interacted with my birds. His five-year-old, Ashley, also paid her respects by picking some the honeysuckle blooming by the screen door and placing them over the small cairn I had fashioned out of pink quartz.

Ashley was still living with her mother when Mike and I first married, but she spent two days a week and every other weekend with us—long enough for her to remember her Dad’s promise to get her a puppy. She had four cats, a hamster, a goldfish and a parrot at her mother’s house—but it wasn’t enough. I reasoned with Mike that she could only play with a dog every other weekend—who was going to take care of the dog the rest of the time? We both knew it wouldn’t be him, since he worked in his construction business all day. I was the one with the flexible schedule. I dug my heels in and refused the responsibility. It was a bitter time, with him arguing, then agonizing over how to break the news to Ashley—and me envisioning a dog with a bird in its mouth the first week.

Shortly afterwards, Ashley decided she didn’t like the birds, or dogs. I wasn’t sure if she was resentful over the broken dog promise, or jealous over the fuss I made over the birds, or both. She and her father were very close—and though Ashley and I adored each other, the two often seemed to side against me. I coaxed her to eat nutritious food, helped with her homework, cleaned her room, suggested activities when she was bored, but when it came to reprimands or timeouts, Mike drew a line in the sand and rarely allowed me to cross it. Those were the times when I turned to my pets.

The birds, and particularly Percy, had helped me through the beginnings of my struggle to stay sober. Percy had seen me through the ending of relationships, the lonely gift of learning who I was independent of another person. She was there through the absence of friends and family, the beginning of a fresh life, of moving from the apartment to my townhouse, and then another move after I married Mike. As Brenda and Paul may have intuited, when the lovers were gone, or even welcome change seemed at times

unbearable, she was my constant in the midst of the variables, there to watch over and cuddle and kiss and drop my tears upon when I felt frightened or unloved. Or ignored. When my frustration mounted, a gentle tongue nibble from Percy would calm my nerves and misgivings. I needed her more than ever.

I was standing in the kitchen, leaning down to load the four-month-old dishwasher in the garage. I insisted upon routing the plumbing from the washer and dryer in the garage and installing a dishwasher next to the kitchen door, since there was no room in the kitchen for the appliance. I warned my husband and stepdaughter of the various dangers of this arrangement. I emphasized how important it was not to leave the outer garage door open, because although I normally keep the birds' wings clipped, one of them might still escape. "Danny has been with me nine years, and Percy seven, longer than any living thing," I told Mike when I moved in. "There will be hell to pay if one of them escapes because you or Ashley didn't close the garage door." I softened the sting of my words with a smile, so he would think I was half-joking and didn't distrust him, but we both knew that I was dead serious. Even though he was an animal lover and had had his share of cats and dogs, he liked to tease Percy to annoy me. He'd tap her beak with his forefinger and she'd hiss and spread her wings, fluttering away. He also was unfamiliar with, and a bit skeptical of, the horror stories I regaled him with, ones I'd heard from fellow bird owners: mishaps such as birds flying into ceiling fans or drowning in open-lidded toilets, stepping on hot burners, or getting trapped in refrigerators. Or flying out windows and doors that were only open for a split-second.

I was impatient on that busy Saturday morning, intent upon cleaning quickly so I could weed the flower beds, clean out my car, and help Ashley with her grammar homework. I clanked dishes in their slots through the opened kitchen door, knowing that the garage door was also open but confident it would only be for a few minutes; besides, the cool spring air was fresh. I had grown careless with tending to the birds, not having clipped their wings in months, complacent that their cage was tucked in the far corner of the family room. I was busy building my own nest, immersed in my new role as stepmother and wife.

Then I heard the whisper of wings and a bump on the side of the living room wall before Percy rounded the corner, into the kitchen. She sailed over my head. My flailing, wet hands grasped thin air, but Percy was free, her unclipped wings surfing through the garage, narrowly missing the antenna on my car. She finally encountered an infinite, unparalleled sky. Initially wobbly, she caught air and floated over oak and palm trees and rooftops before dissolving into larkspur blue.

Next the search: I knocked on neighbors' doors, sharing my plight and nodding as tongues clicked in sympathy. They allowed me to pick through their grassy backyards, to check their sparkling seventy-degree pools for a drowning bird. I craned my neck to sift out a feathered form in the orange trees and hibiscus bushes. Whistling, I peddled my bike around the neighborhood, stopping to listen every few yards.

Finally I returned to the house, where, for a time, my husband pretended to sleep on the couch and Ashley had fled to her room. While Mike was distressed, I saw the relief on his face that it was my crime, not his. I curled up, alone, Percy-less, on the other sofa.

Later, Mike asked how I felt. Most of my response tumbled out: I was afraid of the death of our passion; I hungered for his love the way Percy craved to have a breath of wind lift her wings; that although we had left the question of having our own children open, that year of unprotected sex would yield nothing, like Percy's infertile eggs. I didn't say I was afraid of how much I could love Ashley when I craved a child of my own; I didn't say that the loss of my pet signified the end of a single life I sometimes missed.

I stared wide-eyed on the sofa, with the drone of the football game on television competing with a fly buzzing on the family room's windowsill. It flitted around, slowly drained itself obsolete. I drifted into a sleep of escape.

When I snapped awake, I realized I was giving up, trying to burrow my head in the sand. I could not give up. I resumed pedaling around the neighborhood, and in less than an hour, I heard a faint cry, her distinct Percy-chirp. I struggled to pinpoint her location, listening to the pitch of her cry grow louder as I whistled. Finally I targeted her chirp, threw my bike down in the middle of the street, and leaped across a driveway laden with garage sale junk. A startled young mother protectively clutched her child as I stumbled past them and flung open an iron gate to a backyard, unmindful of gaining permission. There Percy was, huddled behind a dirty gray air-conditioning unit, her soft gray-green underbelly heaving and shivering. She was within arm's reach. I half-groaned, half-sighed, trembling, amazed that I almost gave up, and grateful that my carelessness would leave our unconditional, reciprocal affection unscathed. For a moment, I revisited the fragile, crumbling idea that I was immortal and surely no tragedy would befall me.

I leaned down to offer a finger for her to climb on. As she raised a foot to step up, the dog in the adjacent fenced-in plot let out a growl, followed by a series of howls. Percy flapped out of the air conditioning unit's shelter, briefly making contact with the tips of my nails before she zig zagged around my grasping hands and the corner, over the house with the yard sale in progress. I stared in disbelief while the yard sale participants shaded their eyes and watched the spectacle, a flash of gray yellow-green dissolving into the sky. I could only watch her soaring high, free, whistling her frenzied flight song as she disappeared over the rooftop.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMMERSION

After my cockatiel Percy escaped through an open garage door, the winter remained atypically bitter-cold for eastern Florida. By moist spring, my new husband could no longer bear to see my vigilant, melancholy evening bike rides around the neighborhood searching for the lost bird. He's not much of a griever, at least in the crying, discussing, or hand-wringing sense, and any brooding he does is internal, usually in a prone position on our living room couch as he stares at whatever sports programs he can find on television. He wanted me to move on, not to feel the emotional pain, even though a part of him knew it was what I needed most. Even when I attempted to conceal my suffering with humor by saying things like, "I can't believe Percy flew the coop," he wasn't fooled. He wanted to offer a band-aid for my suffering and then step away. So he removed the cage, rusted orange from exposure to the moisture, from the front yard where I'd placed it in case Percy circled the area and spotted her old home. Then he went inside and stood over me while I lay curled up on the sofa. "Get up. We're going to the pet store."

"No bird can replace Percy," I said, but for once, I was grateful for his gift of a bandage, a placebo for my grief. He didn't know of my weekly surreptitious visits to the pet store to play with the baby cockatiels. Even though I still had my ten-year-old parakeet, Danny, most days he sat hunched on his perch. He had always preferred birds to people.

“Danny needs company, too, you know,” he said. He was right. I’d continued to take care of Danny, but he was lonely and getting old. Parakeets in captivity normally don’t live past two or three years, but with proper care, they can live a decade or more.

The minute I walked into the pet store and made a bee-line for the cockatiels in their Plexiglas pen, I spied a bright yellow baby who reminded me of spring, of yellow mums, of sunshine. The spiky-feathered hatchling was just out of her incubator, crying with her mouth open and tilted, neck craned, wings slightly spread and shaking, as chicks typically do when they are hungry. I fell in love with her vulnerability. I needed *some thing* to love, to depend solely on me. I persuaded the pet store clerk, who had watched my tearful, secret weekly visits to the pet store after Percy was gone, and knew me well by this time, to let me take the baby cockatiel home and finish the remaining weeks of hand feeding. Ashley, my seven-year-old stepdaughter, cooed over her and named her Lemon-Lime, which I shortened to Lemon for the bright yellow hues on her head and tail feathers that intermingled with her gray-green body. We put her in an old turtle tank with a heating pad, and I immersed myself into feeding her the mushy formula three or four times a day with a dropper until she was able to transfer to the cage with Danny and eat on her own. I had discovered over the years that cockatiels and parakeets could cohabitate in harmony.

Lemon had a sweeter disposition than Percy because of the taming effects of hand feeding, and loved to learn tricks, like taking the cap off of a pen with her beak and putting it back on. She was sweet, but she wasn’t Percy, who had been my companion for seven years. I loved Lemon in a different way, with wariness and sadness mingled with

protectiveness. I didn't bring as much neediness to our relationship, because I since was newly and happily married, I didn't have to depend entirely on my pets for love and attention as I had with Percy and Danny. Lemon was just a pet bird, or so I tried to convince myself.

The house was blissfully quiet. I was alone, writing in my study, listening to the satisfying click of fingertips on the keyboard. My fingers paused in mid-sentence, aware that the silence was too heavy. No metallic clacking of birds crawling around in their cages. No chirps. I swirled around in my desk chair and scrambled into the kitchen. The clear contents of tall pink-hued drinking glass left on the wooden countertop were a blend of soggy gray water and dull yellow feathers.

I actually hesitated before approaching the drinking glass. I craned my neck around the kitchen wall into the family room, certain that Lemon was safe in her cage. Danny was a sleeping blue ball, but Lemon wasn't there.

I grabbed the offending glass and tipped it over, and out poured Lemon's limp, drowned body. For a moment I unreasonably thought an intruder had jimmied the locked kitchen door open and picked up the bird, tipped her head first into the glass, and shoved her in: a forced dive. I screamed, and as hysterical laughter bubbled up in my throat about what I was about to do, I closed my lips over her small beak, trying to pump small puffs of air into her stiffening chest. She was too far gone. I realized my folly: a bird trained to drink out of a glass for our entertainment. A bird left perched on a fabric-covered bar chair by the kitchen counter. Ignored and temporarily forgotten.

Imagine leaning over the smooth, time-worn stone edge of a narrow well to take a sip of water just out of tongue's reach. Your feet are firmly planted on the ground, but you are forced to raise your heels off the ground, perching on the tips of your toes to stretch farther, to direct your seeking lips to the water below. You can't use your arms for leverage because the well is too narrow, and besides, your shoulders are immersed, so your arms remain locked at your sides. The water appears distant even though it's within inches. The liquid smells tantalizing, a fresh, slightly sulfuric moist aroma that clashes with dry air. You are so thirsty; no, parched, and you watch your reflection shimmer as you strain further. The pads of your three longest toes are now the only contact with the soft grass, but the weight of your body hanging over the edge causes you to lose the toe hold. You propel into a swan dive, over the side and into the well.

There is no time to consider how dark and tight the walls are in which your body is trapped, because your head is immersed in the deep, puddled water you craved. You can only move your head side to side, gulping cool liquid, quenching your thirst as you slowly drown. And you do drown, because there is no one to grab your feet and pull you back.

That's what loneliness is, when you are abandoned even when someone sits in the next room. A precarious hold on life that can slip out of your clutch in a New York minute. Breathless. A floor splashed with spilled water; the lack of a time machine to reverse memory and mistakes. That's what I'm thinking when I dive to the kitchen's

beige and blue floor, pounding my fists on the refrigerator, screaming at cabinet doors, bruising my bony wrists and elbows on the unforgiving tiles.

In my deck of tarot cards, after Lemon died, I often pulled the Death, or Transformation, card. It is symbolized as a skeleton walking along a rocky path. The figure is said to be the Fool, who, like a skeleton, has left behind his old life and is stripped to the bone. The humbled Fool understands that his barrenness is the only way he can rebuild his foundation if he doesn't resist change. Behind him is darkness, but beyond that, the bright arch of sunrise: rebirth. I imagined Lemon soaring an infinite blue sky with Percy, circling a manicured park or golf course, the way domestic birds that are set free or escape from their owners often travel in flocks.

I've read that, just as water birthing is considered less traumatic for a baby, perhaps a liquid death is an easier transition between the worlds than other types of transformations. Some near-death experience participants report the sensation of soaring in the sky, as if they were flying.

CHAPTER SIX: OF FLESH AND BLOOD

"To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to be ever a child."

-Cicero

You finally found me. How did you find me?

As Sheila and I talked, I scribbled bits of our conversation on a sheet on a yellow legal pad. *She thinks I was born September 13, not the 14th. She quit drinking ten years ago. That not a day passed when she didn't think about me.* We talked for three hours, her telling me it was a miracle that I'd called, that her husband had just died. That she was never able to have other children. That she had placed me for adoption to prevent her brothers and sisters from being taken out of the home. That she never searched for me because the social worker had said my records would remain permanently sealed. That no one but her parents and her older sisters Nancy and Claudine, knew of my existence. I asked her the same question as I had asked Terri: Did something happen in 1989?

I'll have to think about it, she said.

And while I didn't ask, she offered that there was one thing she would never discuss with me—who my father was. I was sure this had to do with her being promiscuous, as the court records had indicated. Once she realized that I wasn't judging her on the issue of sex, she'd tell me, I just knew it. In time.

Finally we hung up, with promises to talk more the next day. I crawled into bed that early morning, when the crickets and frogs had finally reached a low hum, imagining

Sheila, listening to her soothing voice. I hugged the pillow, curling against the warm softness of my mother, and fell asleep.

That night I dream that the exposed mystery of my birth is unraveling me. I'm on the swampy creek bank that runs through my Kirkland neighborhood. Momma, the one who fought so hard to adopt me, grips the end of a flowing yellow ribbon, and when I touch it, I am drawn into her, suffocated in the folds of her apron. On the other side of the clear, rippling water stands Sheila, a pale, faceless, plump mother. She is waving, showing me a drawing, because the social workers have said she was artistic. She is trying to tell me that's where my talent developed, not from my mother who never drew, never liked to play in the water, never allowed me to climb the stairs to the elevator of the Space Needle. *I would have let you ride that elevator*, my birthmother says. I don't know whether to jump, dunk my head, or wade into the middle of the creek and float downstream, avoiding both of them. In the dream, I decide to remain standing against the current of the icy waist-high water. I extend my arms out to each side of the embankment. As both mothers grip my fingers, I wonder if my body and spirit will stretch far enough for each of them, and if I will be elastic enough to snap back in place, intact.

Sheila floats toward me like a ghost, her short, round figure, draped in a voluminous buttercup yellow dress splashed with pink, lavender and blue flowers, in flesh and blood. I offer a single red rose. As we embrace, it is like hugging both a stranger and a warm, buttery cocoon. I imagine floating in her womb thirty-five years ago. My eyes water. I can feel the mixed rhythm of our rapidly beating hearts. She

continues to hold me tightly as Ron, Sheila's brother, and his wife Anna stand at a distance after taking a couple of snapshots. Later, I look at a photograph of the moment. Both our faces are concealed, buried in each other's necks, my mauve and rose print dress enveloped in the brighter pastel pattern of hers. The disembarking passengers are smiling, reverently moving around our embrace; they sense our heightened emotions, which is confirmed when Ron jokes with them. "Mother/daughter reunion in process, make room for CBS," he smirks as he wipes his own wet eyes.

Sheila hands me a silver necklace with a Peridot cross pendant. An August birthstone, gem of the sun, luminating an eerie green-yellow. She is wearing an identical necklace. I am touched, asking her the significance of Peridot. Isn't this your birthstone? she asks. I show her my sapphire earrings. Oh, I thought Peridot was your birthstone, she says, blushing. Maybe it is, I smile back. Later she will again insist that I was born around eleven o'clock on the evening of September 13—not September 14, as my birth records had indicated.

We stop at Denny's for a late dinner, awkwardly smiling at each other, waiting for a booth. *She doesn't look anything like me*, I think. Her appearance is in startling contrast the photos Ron had sent me of his children and grandchildren—all light-skinned with chiseled cheekbones, pointed chins, and blue eyes. Sheila's skin tone is a tan-caramel that reminds me of my Puerto Rican friend, Suzanne. I'm surprised, because in earlier photos her skin tone looks fair. I'm disappointed, because I can't immediately identify our resemblances. As we hold hands, I examine her short, bottle-auburn frizzed hair, which Suzanne would call *pelo malo* (bad hair) since it resembles her own. I am puzzled,

knowing my own fair skin tans a light golden brown, not caramel, and I wonder if she used one of those self-tanning lotions that tends to turn skin odd shades of orange if applied incorrectly. But I continue smiling at her as we sit in a booth, knowing that my childhood images were only daydreams that had to be smashed at some point to allow for the truth, along with the realization that I'm blessed to have found her, no matter her appearance or circumstances.

She orders milk and French fries and excuses herself to the restroom. Suddenly, I am afraid that she regrets coming here. *Or she's also scared. Or as shocked by my appearance as I am hers.* Ron, had been delighted that we found each other and had arranged for us to meet, has a puzzled look on his normally cheerful and confident face.

"Maybe you should check on her," he suggests. "She doesn't seem herself, even though I haven't seen her since the Dave's funeral last November." *I agree. She looks ill, not disappointed.* As I walk to the restroom, I think about our phone conversations, when Sheila told me she had Hepatitis B. I think about Momma and Daddy, who had their share of family secrets, but drinking, sleeping around, and contracting venereal diseases, like I'd read about Sheila's father in the court documents, weren't some of them.

As I swing open the restroom door, I hear her vomiting into the toilet.

Before that moment in June 1999 when my birthmother stepped off her flight from Oregon, I still watched television reunion stories like "Unsolved Mysteries" and movies on Lifetime, armed with a bed pillow to hug, a box of tissues, and a blanket. I fantasized about appearing on such shows, deliriously happy with my found birth parents

in a spotlight of cameras and reporters. My birth parents, an attractive, responsible looking couple would lean toward me, listening. I'd wipe my tears and grow solemn, reassuring them that, *it's okay, really. I'm grateful you let me go so I could be raised in a secure, loving family. I forgive you...* and we'd embrace while they wept that they'd had to give up such a lovely, bright young daughter, with all four parents convening at a quaint sidewalk bistro for brunch. Then we'd stay at the Ritz-Carlton in Central Park where the show's producers had booked rooms for us. We would plan a summer vacation together, ideally in Washington State, so I could take a tour of my birthplace and my birth families' hometowns. After Momma's trepidations and Daddy's uncertainty about the idea that I had sought out and found my birthmother, the two families would bond, in mutual gratitude and relief that the adoption had been for the best. Then we'd attend a follow-up reunion episode, chasing the blue sky of our togetherness.

But as I watched Sheila weave her way down the plane's ramp, sharing the circumstances surrounding my search and our reunion on a talk show in front of millions of viewers would be the last thing I would consider, ever.

Sometime before or after midnight on September 14, 1962, a plump fifteen-year-old with sweat running down her face, past her blue, pain-filled eyes, has just given birth to a baby girl in an unwed mother's home in Spokane. She is one hundred and twenty miles from her parents' home, and she's here on a promise to her Washington State juvenile caseworker: if she agrees to give up her baby for adoption, thus not bringing yet *another* mouth to feed into her family, the Department of Child and Welfare services

won't take the girl's younger brothers and sisters from the home and put them in foster care. After all, four of the remaining eight siblings still live in Cashmere, where the girl was born, with alcoholic parents. The girl lives in a splintered, wood framed house on an embankment near the Wenatchee River, where she spent much of her childhood swimming alone, cleansing herself of the rat-infested, crowded, and cluttered home, imagining the rushing water would carry her to an exotic island. Her older brother, Sonny, has been in a lot of trouble with the law; the girl's father has been on a pension disability from the Union Pacific Railroad since God knows when. Her parents fought when her mother Dorothy was home, which she seldom is. Dorothy prefers to dance it up at the Velvet Hammer, swaying and drinking to the sound of Gene Autry, Tex Ritter and Hank Williams echoing from the Victrola. When she is fifty-four, she'll die of a heart attack in the middle of a dance floor in Sacramento. And the girl's older sister, Claudine, has had two children out of wedlock. She had kept her babies, thus relying on the state's welfare system to raise her children.

The girl, Sheila, is frightened, but she hasn't yet lost her spirit, because she hasn't signed the paperwork to relinquish her child. Under the foot-tapping, frowning face of the obstetric nurse, she silently names me, her baby, Rochelle. Rochelle Osborn. Then a few minutes later, after she held me in her arms and counted my fingers and toes and tried to burn my tiny red face into her memory, she placed me in the nurse's arms.

Two days earlier, Ron and his wife, Anna, had flown into Orlando to stay at their timeshare while we waited for Sheila's later flight. Ron couldn't persuade me to go to

Oregon to meet her. There was a heavy lump on my heart, one built from fear and distrust, that overrode my eagerness to meet her. The initial elation that I'd felt when I found her was wearing off, for several reasons. It bothered me that, although Sheila's letters were sweet and eager, she seemed distant and closed over the phone—every time we talked, she mentioned something about having to drive a bus to make ends meet since her husband died, or how her will stated her estate would include two trust funds set up for her young nephews, my second cousins.

Ron looked even taller than the photos he's sent—thin, light-skinned with blue eyes, fifty-ish, and balding except for a tuft of brown-gray hair. He wore wire-rimmed glasses. Anna, his plump, fair skinned wife stood beside him. He folded me into his lanky frame, and I hugged my *uncle*, my birth mother's favorite brother, for the first time. His blood is in my blood, I thought, searching his face, seeing my complexion, high cheek bones, pointed chin, and blue eyes staring back at me. I had planned to stay in a hotel while we became acquainted, but he wouldn't hear of it. "We aren't uncomfortable if you aren't. We'll get a rollaway bed in our timeshare unit," he argued. "We're family."

His friendliness and kidding relaxed me. I had learned that he played Santa during the Christmas season for whoever will have him. He was a drill sergeant in the military, and worked for an army base in Sacramento, California. He was trained to put people both at ease and in their place.

We spent the next day exploring Magic Kingdom, where Ron acted like the clown he enjoys playing at birthday parties, teasing the children around him as we waited in the endless lines. He and his wife truly enjoyed the theme parks—but I also wondered if it

was a safe, distracting, less awkward way for them to get know me, to feel out what type of person I was before Sheila's arrival the following day. As they grew more comfortable around me, we began speculating about my birth. When Sheila first called Ron to tell him that her long lost daughter had found her, the phone lines had been jammed with the siblings' calls to one another, particularly to Randy, the youngest, who hadn't known of my birth, and Claudine, who had been closest in age and relationship with Sheila throughout the years even though Claudine still lived in Washington State. Both sisters, Claudine and Dolly, had speculated that Jim was the father. Jim had been her boyfriend before my birth and Sheila had married him after she graduated from high school. But they also wondered, as my birth records had indicated, that Sheila did not know exactly who the father was. She had told me, during our first phone conversation, that she would never speak about "the father." To anyone. *She doesn't know me very well*, I had thought. I had waited too long to get only half the story. *When we meet face to face, she'll tell me.*

Sheila and I are standing at the door of Ron and Anna's condominium unit, saying goodnight to them. Ron flashes a smile at me that says, *don't be afraid, you've both waited all your life for this*. We walk together to our unit two doors down, our shoulders gently bumping as I fumble the key in the lock. Sheila is still pale but smiling as we settle in, pretending that it is the most normal thing in the world for estranged birthmother, and daughter, who have met two short hours ago, to unpack and use the toilet with only a curtain separating it from the bed. As I undress and put on pink cotton pajamas, she uses the toilet, and I can't avoid hearing her wretch once again and expel a watery gush which

I know is diarrhea. I wonder what in the world I've gotten myself into, with this woman who is a stranger. Our bond is the event of my birth, our shared blood, and it is also our mutual suffering, of being separated for all these years. I feel like I'm being sucked down a river of white water rapids, and I want to pull back, grab a sturdy branch, crawl to shore. *Calm down, we have all the time in the world*, I think, staring at the ceiling as she changes into her long pale lavender-flowered nightgown with ruffled short sleeves. She is grinning, giggling, as if the end of the flight and the vomit and diarrhea episodes have purged her. "I want to tell you everything," she says, her whispers caressing me as we lie facing each other. I watch her dry lips, thinking *everything except about my father*. But I am confident that once we get to know one another, she will trust me; she'll confide in me when she realizes that I won't judge her, that I can handle the truth, and that her secret will be safe with me.

The first thing I do is slowly, carefully, reach for her hand, pretending to inspect a large yellow-orange sapphire ring on her finger. Suddenly, despite our mutual eagerness, I don't want her to see my hunger when I touch her. She watches me looking at her hand. "Do you like it?" she asks. "I've always loved rings. These are costume jewelry. I left my diamonds at home."

I ignore her comment. "Your hands. They are so smooth and feminine," I say, studying her natural, medium length white nails and shell-pink nail beds. Her hands are slightly smaller than mine, fingers slender but slightly plump, which erases most of the lines on her knuckles. "You have beautiful hands," I say, frowning at my own fingers, which are longer, a bit spotted from the sun, and reddened by poor circulation and air

conditioning. I spread my palm and fingers against hers. My hands are giants, with visible blue veins, like Momma's, and Sheila's are delicate and miniature, unlike the rest of our bodies in comparison. She is not obese as I originally was warned by the court documents, and by Ron; rather, her face, neck, and arms are fairly thin, and most of her weight is all around her middle, from the waist down to her belly. She appears bloated rather than fat.

All of my preconceived notions fade as I study her prone form lying next to me. My childhood daydreams that I lived with for so many years are dissolving while I watch her giggle. So many years wondering and worrying about finding her, of imagining that she looked like Ali McGraw, a version of me with darker hair. That she was possibly married to my birthfather, and if not, she certainly would have kept in touch. That he surely knew about me; but even if he didn't, she would be so happy to have found me that she would contact him and let him know, setting aside old resentments and misunderstandings they may have had.

Sheila is giddy, almost as if she is drunk; I don't expect this from the rather careful, calm, formal conversations we have had long distance. I try to ignore the sickening sweet odor that I attribute to diarrhea, what reminds me of how my bathroom would smell after a night of drinking red wine. But there is no alcohol on her breath. She inspects my fingers and toes. *For the second time*, she says. I point to my second toe, which is longer than the others. "I think Nicki might have those toes," she says, referring to her nephew, Claudine's grandson.

“Not a day went by that I didn’t think of you,” she says for the hundredth time. We went into greater detail than we had during our phone calls and written correspondence since I found her in March. She hadn’t been able to bear any other children. “I’m not sure if I’d been a very good mother,” she says.

“Why?” I ask.

“I would have been strict,” she says, but I don’t think she’s telling the truth. I wonder if she was thinking about the unstable years she drank—although I calculate, if she didn’t start drinking until she was thirty-four, quit at forty-four, and had been sober ten years to her current age of fifty-four, it doesn’t add up. I also wonder if the man who impregnated her has anything to do with it—she had again stated, with no expression at all, that she wouldn’t talk about him.

I don’t push for too many details, though, realizing I can’t expect her to open up all at once, but instead I joke that Momma had been strict enough for both of them. She was curious about my adoptive parents, and I told her about Momma always being protective of me; that my parents had also adopted a son two years after me, whom they’d had to give custody back to Washington State when they realized he was mentally ill and could be a danger to their little girl. She shook her head, saying what a shame that was, and I hastily added that I had worked through those issues—and I had a pretty normal childhood. She listens quietly, watching my face.

“What does she think about you finding me?” she asks.

The answer was complicated; but for simplicity, for both their sakes, for the hope that they’d one day meet, I said, “She’s afraid.”

Sheila repeats what a blessing that I found her right after her husband, Dave, who she'd met after she moved to Oregon, died in November 1998.

"We were never able to have children," she repeated. I was her only child. We talked through most of the night, with me occasionally urging her to get some sleep so that I could. I want to escape the spinning feeling of joy and confusion for a few hours and recharge. She refuses, and later I'll wonder if she has the intuition that this may be the most intimate, candid conversation we'll ever have.

As we talk, I'm awed by the discovery of how our lives were similarly patterned, in both circumstance and choice when we reached adulthood, despite our opposite upbringings. We married at eighteen to well-meaning, sandy-haired, green-eyed men who turned violent when they drank, which was compounded by our own belligerent drunkenness. We both love lavender, lilacs and bird watching, and fishing; we both love reading horror novels and watching *Psycho* and *Friday the 13th*; we adore the water, pool, ocean, pond or river, swimming and floating, the feeling of weightlessness and motion.

We both are sensitive to light and sound, and when we sleep we occasionally wear eye masks and the same brand of ear plugs to bed. We also got into the same type of trouble when we drank alcohol, like smashing into trees and bridges and being arrested for driving drunk. Even though I sensed a quality about her that wasn't quite right, as I had sensed in people since observing my mentally ill brother, we bonded. Our blood mingled without having to rub our bleeding fingers together. Just for that night, it was as if we had never been separated.

Her laughter, her pirate-like grin, and her voice were like watching and listening to my mirror image. I ask her several times if anything happened ten or so years earlier, when I'd had my first premonitions about finding her, and she shakes her head, only able to think of one milestone. "I stopped drinking about ten years ago," she says. That would have been close to the same time I quit drinking. We share a mask of pain, it seems, that only the other can dissolve.

We reminisced about that first phone conversation, after I'd received my birth records from the State of Washington. "I am so glad, whether it was an act of mercy or a mistake, that the clerk forgot to black out my birthdate. That was probably the only good thing those people ever did." She shook her head. "I still hate them for making me give you up, and then my brothers and sister ending up in a foster home anyway."

Sheila confessed that she was always trying to keep a journal when I'd told her I loved to write. "We should write a book. Let's do it," she says, grasping my hands. "Our story is incredible."

In Cashmere, Washington, 1963, less than a year after Sheila gave birth to me, my biological grandparents had their photo taken. My copy has an orange-brown tinge, as if the warm colors have enveloped the blues and greens. They stand on the porch steps of their home at 108 Prospect in Cashmere, a village surrounded by fruit orchards and a lumber mill in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Hastily, perhaps right after the photo is taken, they will move thirty miles south to Wenatchee, where their three youngest children are. In this photo before their move, they hope to appear nimble

enough to jump through the necessary hoops to retrieve Ron, Randy, and Dolly, from foster families. My grandfather, Charlie Jim Osborn, is bloated in his loose jean overalls over a long-sleeved Henley shirt. He looks very different, *tired*, compared to the young, suit-clad man with chiseled cheekbones and full, sensual lips in an earlier photo. He is looking, double-chinned, to the left, beyond the unknown camera man, hands in his pockets as if contemplating why his three youngest children have become Wards of the Court; or perhaps he is speculating where in Wenatchee he will find his children.

My grandmother, Dorothy, stares directly into the lens, a sweet, close-mouthed smile on her face and a violet orchid pinned over her left breast as she primly clutches her abdomen as if she is protecting a growing fetus. She had screamed and screamed on those same porch steps in Cashmere when Social Services came to take her children away. She wonders why, despite being cooperative and supportive of Sheila giving up her child, the social worker broke her promise: to leave her children alone if Sheila, also under the threat of losing her siblings, agreed to put her unborn child up for adoption. Dorothy is rather thin, other than her swollen ankles and distended belly, which is a bloated liver. My grandparents are squinting against the sun. Remnants of snow, in stark clumps, bunch on the ground near the steps, as if resisting the melting effects of the sky's ardor.

The next morning, I roll over and watch Sheila's large form sleeping, and a feeling of loss lingers from the vestiges of a dream: I've glimpsed a rainbow out of the corner of my eye in the soft grayish blue Seattle sky, but before I can turn to appreciate the crimson, pink, orange, yellow, green and blue arches, the sky fades to black. In the

dream, I am powerless to change it. Upon awaking, I am terrified. I check for the rise and fall of Sheila's chest to assure myself she is breathing. As I quietly rise and dress, I think, *I should be happy today*. Ron has planned a trip to Epcot Center, which I had tried to dissuade him from the night before because of Sheila's unexplained illness, but he'll have none of it. Nothing is going to spoil his plans to make our first entire day together perfect. I pace through the hallways and the parking lot as my anxiety increases.

When I return to the room, Sheila is dressed. I ask her how she slept, but she is staring into the mirror over the sink in our hotel-like room. *Who is that?* She says to the mirror before turning to me. What, Mom? I say, and my lips stick together when forming the words. Although she never asked me to, I have been calling her Mom to please her, but I start getting that floating sensation again, like I've separated from my body. She frowns, and turns back to the mirror. *Never mind*, she says, and continues staring at her reflection.

It isn't until a few days later, when she is lying in the hospital bed, that I discover the source of her confusion that morning. Her liver is failing.

I'm anxious to show Sheila my hometown, my version of east coast attractions, but since her favorite brother has other plans for the day, I give up protesting. There will be plenty of time later, I'm sure, to show Sheila *my* Florida. We'll walk the Atlantic shore, collect tiny swirled shells, search for sea beans and green and cobalt-blue sea glass. We will make comparisons of the Florida coast to her Oregon coast, where I would visit a few months later. My husband and I will take her out on the Indian River in our

Wellcraft, showing her my favorite landmark sculpture near the Eau Gallie Causeway: a large green dragon, protecting large eggs, some with baby hatchlings breaking through, on Dragon Point. We'll go out on the casino boat, since she shares my husband's luck and love of gambling. We'll go the helm of the boat as if we were on the Titanic, embracing and letting the rush of ocean breeze blow our hair back. We'll catch catfish off the old Mathers Bridge, and fish my secret trout hole in Mosquito Lagoon. She loved trout fishing, she'd written, and could whip up a delicious seafood stew. As we swim in my pool, I'll float in her arms, inhabiting the cocoon-like immersion that I must have felt in her womb. She will tell me, by the sound of her voice and gestures, the way she looks at me, all I need to know about both of us.

Sheila, wearing a soft blue top, a flowing, flowered skirt, and sensible canvas shoes is quiet on our drive to Epcot Center. Her calves and ankles look the size of thighs, so swollen they are spilling over her shoes. We pull into the theme park before Ron and Anna. Our entrance into the park sets the tone for the entire day; when the ticket booth clerk asked for our money, Sheila stares at nothing, her eyes vacant. I willingly pay her way, because it is a matter of respect--she gave birth to me, and was forced to give me up for thirty-five odd years, time that seemed endless to her, she had said during our frequent phone conversations. The least I could do was treat her to her first taste of Florida, even though it evolved around Disney attractions.

We are nearly the same height, but she tilts her head up at me, clutching my hand like a child. I gently lead her through the entrance, as if she is the child, I the mother. I wonder if she is play-acting about not realizing she had to pay at the gate, or if she is

testing me. Seeing if I'm interested in her money, which she claims not to have, though she told me earlier over the phone that she has set up trust funds for her two nephews—two of whom are being raised by their grandmother Claudine since their mother Patty is a crack addict.

Early in the day, Ron and I rent a wheelchair for Sheila, because she finally admits that her legs are too swollen for walking. She wore thick support hose, but her ankles must have been three times their size the evening before. Ron joked that her wheelchair would get us into the rides quicker; many were handicapped accessible. We took turns pushing her, but I was happy to do the honors, praying I would never be wheelchair bound but glad this woman who gave birth to me was eager to visit a Florida park, which she'd never done. With me. Her only child.

Somehow we missed the *Wonders of Life* attraction where the classic movie "The Making of Me" is featured. I'd watched it years ago, an animated film where the parents meet, fall and love, and conceive a child. It shows the development of a fetus. Epcot claims it answers the questions of the birth process: *Where did I come from? How did I get here?*

Ron and I leave Anna posted next to Sheila's wheelchair for brief conferences throughout the morning. "What is wrong with her?" I ask. "Is she normally this way?"

Ron shakes his head and sighs. "I haven't seen Sheila in a year or so. I don't know if she's playing games with us, or what."

We watch Goofy bend over two small children, flapping his ears at them. Ron seemed to feel she was manipulating us, and if Sheila was anything like me, I knew she

was perfectly capable of doing that, but I didn't have that sense. "Why do you say that?" I ask.

His military upbringing takes over and he straightens his slightly hunched shoulders, lifts his chin, eyeing me. "She used to call me at all hours, drunk out of her mind, wanting reassurances that I loved her. It was the only time she'd really talk to me. She has never been strong. And I won't have her acting this way."

We strolled back to where they waited in the food court. Sheila was fumbling with her pills. She had a huge pill box with purple, yellow, white and pink pills of all sizes. "I need to take a pill," she said, mumbling a drug name we didn't understand. Ron and I exchanged glances.

"Sheila—Mom, how do you know what you're taking?"

The compartments were not labeled. Later, we would identify most of the medications and vitamins—Clorazepate for anti-anxiety, Prilosec for stomach, Toprol XL for blood pressure, Lasix, iron tablets, quinine for leg cramps, Tylenol, and a few enigmatic others.

Ron scolded her as he found her a cup of water for a small white pill she had selected. I suggested we get in line to eat. To diffuse the tension, we chose different food lines.

Anna and Ron headed for the Mexican food, and I herded Sheila to a health food line, hoping that she'll order something nourishing, like soup and chicken salad, maybe a fruit smoothie. I still see her standing there, staring at the menu on the wall behind the cashier as if it is written in Chinese. I read the menu to her.

“French fries, soup, and a Coke.” She stands, clutching her purse. The cashier says, “That will be five dollars and thirty-five cents, ma’am.”

“The cashier is waiting for you to pay, Mom,” I say. My arms are folded, and before I order I want to see if she can count out the money. She hands the teenager a quarter and a nickel from her change purse, and he looks at me in confusion.

“Let me help you, Mom.” I try to cut the crispness of my tone, counting out a few dollars and the correct change.

I try to convince Ron she needs to go to the hospital, right here in Orlando, right now. Anna is concerned, but passive about the whole matter. She crosses her ample breasts and shakes her head. She’s dealt with Ron’s drunken and reckless siblings for too many years, and she misses the signs Sheila is giving us, too. Anna knows too well her husband’s legacy from his alcoholic heritage.

He was still a child when Sheila was a teenager, and as a result of her secret pregnancy, taken from his home. I tried to imagine Ron in foster care, a wild and rebellious young man who lived with a preacher and his wife while Sheila stayed in an unwed mother’s home in Spokane. As much as he talks about overcoming the curse of his upbringing, the old scars are still fiery red in places. I couldn’t begin to understand the relationships of the past with his family that he carried into the present, what memories haunted him, where his distrusts lay simmering.

Sheila and I are on our last boat ride together at Epcot, the *El Rio del Tiempo*: The River of Time. We sit in a boat which mechanically guides us downstream. We watch the

illuminated animatronic dolls and figures twirl, the braided children from different countries, the boys in sombreros and guitars singing to us sing their upbeat, repetitive tune in the gloomy lagoon, at the mouth of a manufactured, smoking volcano. Mexico is dark, the sunset permanently manufactured on the domed sky. Stars on the arched black roof shine over a replica of an Aztec Temple, Quetzalcoatl, which represents the god of life. I hold Sheila's hand, glancing at her, trying to gauge her mood; but she's fallen silent.

Ron and Anna have disappeared to another part of the country to find souvenirs to take to their grandchildren. Sheila and I roam around the Festival Marketplace, where she has to temporarily leave her wheelchair to maneuver around the various "carts" of souvenirs. She stops at one, looks at a leather pouch with feathers. When the dark-skinned vender quotes a price, she fumbles, dropping her bag as she retrieves her wallet. She ignores the dropped bag, as she stares at the wallet, digging for coins, handing the vender some change.

I am afraid. My fear turns to anger, and I find myself placing my hands on my hips, just like Momma did when she grew impatient or defensive. "Mom," I say, the word sounding like a whiny growl. "What are you doing? What's wrong? You just dropped your purse. You didn't give the vendor the correct amount for the pouch."

"Not here." Her voice is low and calm. "Not now."

Her sense of dignity almost brought me to my knees as the mustached Mexican vendor looks at me as if he would like to slap me. I turn away and close my eyes. I was echoing Ron's tactics, and could hear the wheedling tone that sounded like Momma's

voice. I could hear the impatience in my high-pitched, harsh questioning sound of, “Why do you act this way? Why?” when I had been disobedient and received a talking-to. And I passed my abrasive words on to the woman I had only known for two days, retrieving her wallet, the spilled coins.

By the time we left shadowy Mexico and headed for the parking lot, it was dark outside. I was growing as confused as Sheila acted—and I needed to go home to my husband and stepdaughter, sleep in my own bed, absorb the gift of finding her and grieve over seeing her so ill. Ron tried to talk me into staying another night with Sheila. “We are having a barbeque tomorrow, remember?” I try to smile at both Sheila and Ron. “I have to get ready.” I hug them goodbye. Tomorrow will come soon enough.

As I drive back home, I think about my plans for our reunion, to show my birthmother the real Florida. In addition to our plans to boat, fish, and swim, I make a note to take her canoeing at Turkey Creek Sanctuary—from the looks of her physical condition, I’ll do all the rowing—where we’ll see alligators, otters, turtles, tons of birds, and if we’re lucky, a couple of wild hogs, some shy deer. *We have a lot of years to catch up on, and plenty of time to do so*, I think. I want to know all about my history, her story before and leading up to my birth.

Ron calls early the next morning, and I groggily answer the phone after tossing and turning all night. “Hello, my beautiful niece,” he says. “We’ve started our drive from Orlando.” He makes vroom sounds into the phone. I’m getting to know him as the comic relief.

“How is Sheila feeling?” I ask.

“We’ll talk when we get there,” he says.

And we do talk—later in the day. Sheila is disoriented, looking lost. My closest friend, Tina, who suspects she has a half-sister and who has encouraged me to keep trying to find my birth family, comes to our gathering with her daughter, Ashleigh. Tina and the girls are very excited about meeting her. Ron immediately puts on his bathing trunks to join the kids in the pool. “Betcha I can drown you first,” he jokes, and they squeal as they jump in the pool after him, clinging to his shoulders as they giggle. My husband is grilling hamburgers, and Tina suns herself. Anna sits on the pool deck and watches, and everyone seems incredibly happy, except for Sheila and me. I’ve had little chance to voice my fears about her illness.

“I’m sorry, honey, it is too hot for me to go outside. I’ll just sit in the kitchen,” Sheila says, after using the bathroom for the third time in an hour.

“That’s okay, Mom.” The word vibrates in the back of my throat, but my lips seem glued together on the final, drawn-out consonant. The word echoes in my ears, a hollow, misshapen sound, as if I’d just called my husband by another man’s name. When I check the bathroom to make sure there are enough guest towels and toilet paper, I can smell a familiar sweet-sour odor that reminds me of the sanitizer used in Port-O-Lets. She has forgotten to flush the toilet, and as I lean over to press the handle, I notice the toilet water. The water, mixed with her urine, is orange-brown.

The only other time I’ve seen orange urine, which indicates the production of too many bilirubins, was when my husband was diagnosed with Hepatitis B. We were engaged then, and every evening, as he became increasingly irritable, he would go

straight home and fall asleep on the couch. One evening I noticed the whites of his eyes were yellow, a sign of jaundice. I had returned home to look in my trusty medical reference book—fatigue, yellow-orange urine, and jaundice was probably caused by a liver dysfunction like hepatitis or cancer. I called him. “I think you have hepatitis,” I announced. Blood tests later confirmed that he had Hepatitis B. He was ill for months, but with medication, the symptoms finally abated into remission.

While everyone was eating hamburgers, except for Sheila, who said she wasn’t hungry, I went into the study to again pull out the reference book. I ticked off the symptoms in my head: Diarrhea and vomiting, disorientation, orange urine production, bloated abdomen, lack of appetite, fatigue. Confusion. There was one diagnosis that fit these symptoms. Cirrhosis of the liver. I remembered Sheila telling me during one of telephone conversations, casually as if she were telling me she had a mild cold, that she had liver disease. She wouldn’t elaborate, so I filed it away to ask her about when she visited. I hadn’t been worried; after all, she was only fifty-four, and her liver problem could be similar my husband’s hepatitis, which had been successfully treated.

After Tina and her daughter left, I pulled Ron aside. “We’ve got to find out what has been going on with Sheila’s health,” I said. “I looked up her symptoms, and I think her liver is causing her problems. What should we do?”

Ron sighed, his eyes filling with tears as he straightened, toweling off, avoiding my gaze. “I don’t know what to do. Maybe we should call Sis or Dolly. Maybe they have a better idea of what is happening.” He is helpless, needing his sisters’ opinions. Sis, or Aunt Claudine, who still lives in Washington, has spent more time with her than he has.

I sneaked over to the side of the house with the phone, the side where I'd tried to melt into the stucco on the day in March when I read the about my family, and my court-approved adoption. Sheila's younger sister Dolly was calm when I described Sheila's physical and mental state, and I could tell she knew no more than we did. "Take her to the hospital now," she said, adding, "I can't believe Jughead carted her around Epcot all day yesterday." There was a lot of rancor between Dolly and Ron, but I didn't disagree. Ron calls a "family meeting" after Mike has left to take Ashley back to her mother's. Ron and Anna sit on the living room couch, and Sheila and I sit across from them on the loveseat.

"We know you're sick, Sheila," Ron says. He told her she needed to go the emergency room. Did she have insurance coverage? Is there anything about her health we should know?

I nodded along with his questions and at the same time sympathized with Sheila, who was looking disoriented again, grinning slightly as if she is pleased by the unaccustomed attention she's receiving. Still, she refused to tell us what she thought might be wrong with her, but finally she hung her head. "Of course I have insurance," she says. "Maybe I should go to the hospital. I don't feel at all well."

I finger the sterling silver chain with the Peridot cross pendant that she gave me, afraid to enter Sheila's hospital room again. What would I say to this stranger, my birthmother, who appeared to be dying of liver disease? As I hesitated outside the door, the morning nurse, an attractive, fresh-looking young blonde looked at me with

disapproval, her arctic blue eyes frowning at me. “Your mother’s been waiting for you,” she said. Apparently Sheila had told her the story of our reunion. I was already exhausted this morning, and I’d only cleaned one house. I smiled faintly at her, wanting to rip her long locks out of her skull, but said nothing and entered the fifth floor room that smelled of unwashed skin and stale urine no matter how many times they scrubbed the floors with bleach.

Sheila was dozing, her orange-tinged skin papery dry. Now the answer to the question of her complexion that had puzzled me two days earlier was clear. As I walked to the window and looked out over my city, the small eastern coastal Florida town, Sheila stirred.

“Hi, Honey,” she said, slowly stirring to raise herself on the pillow. I walked over and placed my long fingers over my mother’s smaller hand.

The liver is the only organ in the body which is completely capable of regeneration, but only if it hasn’t been damaged beyond a certain point, Dr. Chandra had explained. He had given Sheila high hopes of being treated and cured with a liver transplant. They had discussed the possibility of her staying in Florida, since the gracious doctor, who was currently running for a State office position, professed that Florida liver transplants were abundant. Sheila, to my horror, had considered it. I am ashamed still to admit feeling this unwillingness to be thrown into her life so soon, and even my husband was surprised by my reticence. “You are such a giving, open person,” he said. “What an opportunity this would be, to get to know the mother you’ve been searching for all these years.”

I shook my head. “Everything has happened so quickly.”

I was afraid—that I would end up taking care of her, that maybe it was her family’s plan all along to desert her and deposit her into my naïve hands, although some of them, particularly Ron, didn’t know she had liver disease, and no one knew of the progressed state of her illness. I didn’t realize I was still in shock from meeting her. I wanted to pull away, curl up into an internal ball and mull over this strange gift, lick my wounds of disappoint and elation. Besides, between cleaning jobs, I kept secretly running to my doctor’s office—first a bladder infection, then a yeast infection, and finally they scheduled a whole battery of tests, including monitoring my heart, which had been skipping beats. I would lie in bed at night, and my heart would just stop for a beat before it resumed. I wondered, full of self-pity, whether I was truly suffering from a broken heart.

When Sheila was being admitted to the hospital, Ron and Anna caught their flight back to Sacramento. My phone remained virtually silent for a week. I know he and the siblings called Sheila’s hospital room, but I received no calls. No offers of help, as if the romantic notion of the reunion was all a farce, a temporary fascination. To be fair, I knew Uncle Ron had deemed me a fit daughter who would take care of Sheila, and despite the fact that I tried my best, I failed miserably.

During my last visit to Maile, who was a friend as well as my physician, I cried, telling her the story of how my birthmother had landed in the hospital, how her brother had gone back to Sacramento, how I had started calling her Sheila-Mom, how the words stuck in my throat, how I felt guilty for not spending more time with her at the hospital.

“You are not responsible for this woman,” Maile said. “She did not raise you. You owe her nothing.” Maile, normally warm-hearted and cheerful, was firm, directing me to go back to the hospital administrator and change the next of kin from me to her brother. To avoid financial responsibility. To avoid confusion over my identity. “And stop calling her “Mom,” she said.

I didn't understand what she meant. *My identity?* I'd dreamed of this reunion my whole life. I was a grown woman, for chrissakes. I was not a child, but a woman with a new husband and stepdaughter, who had been adopted by parents she loved, who had reunited with her birthmother, who had learned that she could be dying.

At the time, I did not identify myself as being confused over my adoptive and birth family. I was confused about being left to take care of a woman I'd known for only a few days. I took Maile's suggestion, changing the responsible party from myself to Ron, at least on paper.

“To qualify for the liver transplant list, you must prove a six-month residency in Florida,” Dr. Chandra told us during his morning rounds.

“That is a lot of time to wait,” I said to Sheila, turning to Dr. Chandra. “Wouldn't she have a better chance in Oregon?” Dr. Chandra considered my question while he studied me.

“Either way, we must act quickly,” he replied.

I remember Sheila looking up at me with a crooked smile. I knew she sensed my fear that she would stay. “I miss my cats and my new puppy,” she said. She hadn't yet

been told her that the puppy had died under her Oregon friend's care. She wanted to go home, and she promised to follow through at the Portland Institute when she returned to Coos Bay.

What was a complete mystery to me was how she had been mishandled by her local physician. The specialists had much difficulty in requesting records from his Coos Bay office. Dr. Kartsonis, her Florida kidney specialist, swore the liver disease was caused by Hepatitis B, not alcoholism. She had quit drinking ten years earlier, so she had claimed, though Ron disagreed, saying she'd called him drunk about five years earlier.

Dr. Kartsonis, too, was fascinated by our story. "I don't know what is running through that Oregon physician's head," he as much as said. It was as if the Oregon physician had written her off as a transplant candidate because of her drinking history.

One thing Dr. Chandra was right about, I thought as I researched online while she lay in the hospital bed ten miles away, was that the liver is the only organ capable of complete regeneration. So if a specialist manages to successfully treat the disease, there is a chance of complete recovery. However, the double-edged sword of the resiliency is that it is more difficult to diagnose liver disease, since for years the liver still performs its primary function of recycling and eliminating waste from the body. I tried to picture the smooth, abstract shape of a glistening maroon-hued organ, pulsing as it took in leftover pill residue, tried to filter liquid and toxins that it couldn't process; like a fiery red sunset that was stimulating to admire, but the direct result of absorbing the planet's chemical pollution. A particularly vibrant sunset was toxic, whereas a paler, less spectacularly

hued sky was much purer and cleaner. Both of us drank ten years before we quit. So far, my liver enzymes had been normal since I quit drinking. But I wondered what was in store for me—and I only had half of my medical history. An aunt and older uncle who died of cancer, grandparents who had died of heart disease, a living uncle who was forty-one and had already been diagnosed with heart disease. Ron seemed to be the only sibling unscathed by illness. He no longer smoked or drank, and perhaps had broken the cycle of alcoholism that plagued his family. He still bore the scars of his past—he suspected that Charles Osborn was not his father, given that his mother had slept around.

I hoped that I too, would skate around the hereditary factors and cling to environmental, no matter whom our fathers were.

In another photo, where Dorothy is holding a blonde-haired baby Sheila on her lap, I can see more family resemblance to my grandmother Dorothy than the others, with her wire-rimmed glasses, straight but narrow nose, high cheekbones, and pointed chin. “Can you see the similarities?” I ask anyone who hears of my search and reunion and notices the photos. My tone is pleading, demanding, and no one dares to shake his or her head or deny the resemblance. What only my closest friends and family know, however, is that the similarities don’t end with physical appearances—my inherited legacy includes bad vision, alcoholism and recklessness. I loved to drink and dance—I could easily have joined Dorothy as she spun her tall body around a dance floor. I could have easily passed out—or blacked out, just like her, and become pregnant as a result of a one-night stand.

On the third day of Sheila's hospitalization, I managed to catch her awake. It seemed every time I would call or visit she would be sleeping. But that day I pulled a chair up to the end of her bed, instead of beside it, and asked her the question I know she'd been dreading—the question she'd begged me not to ask, the subject she would never speak of.

“Please tell me what you know about my biological father,” I began, hating myself for this planned inquisition, when I knew she was most vulnerable.

Her head sank down in the pillow as she closed her eyes. “The moment I laid eyes on you, I knew who the father was.”

I noted again her use of *the* father, not *your* father. I don't remember much about her story, except that she had sex with three different men in a short time period. “I told the social worker that the Mexican, the one you read about in the birth family records, was probably the father. I kept the details to myself, though I know she must have thought I was sleeping around.”

I remembered how she had described the father to the social worker according to my records, how he weighed about one-fifty and had dark brown hair and eyes. Indian?

I made that part up, she says. I don't remember, though I think he had a cousin who had some Indian descent.

“I had also been seeing Jim on and off, though we were broken up at the time.”

Jim had been her husband, that she had married when she was eighteen, two years after my birth. “So it wasn't him?” I asked, hoping that it was, that I had a name, that I could find him.

“No. You looked like the other one. The one I never again wanted to think about.”

There was a lot she didn't remember—just the likeness I had to him: the hair coloring, blondish red like mine, the eyes, the lips. The slender structure of my body. Her body sat ramrod straight—a mask had fallen over her face. It was like stone. Please, I said. *Please understand how long I've waited for answers.* I stood up, circling my chair, facing the door as if to leave.

“It was a one-night stand,” she continued. “Back then, no didn't mean no. Maybe it still doesn't.”

Sheila, a fifteen-year old girl, has deserted her small hometown of Cashmere, hitched a ride on Interstate 97 to Spokane. At least that's what her younger brothers and sister will be told—she has run away, and her father has gone to bring her back home. She doesn't go home, though. While she is there, she meets a tall, blonde-haired man with gold-flecked blue eyes. They end up necking in a hotel room, and when he has her pressed to the bed, she whispers no. He gropes for the elastic on her peddle-pushers, easily pulling them over the girl's plump hips. She tries to push his chest, struggle away, but his weight holds her down. He rapes her.

The details after that are foggy—he is gone the next minute, and she never sees him again. But he has left her more than shame and fear. The next few months are a blur—she is still fifteen, but she is wiser now. And she realizes she is pregnant. She wanders around the small town, and the local police pick her up, take her to juvenile hall. It is then that her dad comes—but she is already booked into the system. When she

admits she is pregnant, they start the paperwork to place her in an unwed mother's home, assuring her that if she gives up her baby, that her younger siblings won't be placed into foster care. She wants to tell them, she made a mistake. She wanted something better than the shitty life she had Cashmere, where her parents fought, at least when they weren't out at the bars. She wants to tell them she just wanted someone to care about her, to pay attention to her. She didn't want someone to rape her.

She doesn't tell the social worker these things, that she has become pregnant because of the rape. They won't believe her, given the history of her promiscuous older sister, her criminal brother, a partially blind father who is on disability from the railroad, her alcoholic mother who spends more time at The Velvet Hammer than at home. So she simply tells them she doesn't know who the father is. Really, she doesn't. She doesn't remember his name. Only his eyes, those gold-crusted blue eyes not meeting hers as he pins her to a bed and enters her.

I leave my post at the end of her bed, walk around to her right side, cup her hands in my palms. *God, I'm so sorry*, I whisper. She closes her eyes, sleeps. I drive home in a daze. All I can think of is how sorry I feel for her, for me, for both of us. I can't even conceive of trying to reconcile my conception with date rape, besides thinking, *it's a wonder she wanted anything to do with me at all*. I try to focus on the gift of meeting her.

I call Tina, tell her what is happening. I ask her what she thought of Sheila, other than the fact that she was sick, of course.

“She seems—like she has fulfilled her last wish. To meet you, and now she's ready to die.”

After twelve days, Sheila checks herself out of the hospital. We drive around gathering medical records for her to take to Oregon—every day I’ve called to arrange for a liver specialist from Portland, another local physician for her to take the records to. *She hasn’t even slept in the guest bedroom with the fresh lavender-colored sheets, the vase of silk lilacs, her favorites, I think. I haven’t even cooked for her.* The one thing she had asked for, I couldn’t find anywhere—a turban to cover her unwashed hair.

Now, as she enters my house for the second and last time, she shuns real food. On the way to the Orlando airport, my husband stops for gas, and she goes into the store, comes out tucking a Snickers bar and potato chips bag into her purse.

She is in her wheelchair, waiting to board the plane that will return her to Oregon. I have decided, despite her pleas, not to return with her. I’ve been physically sick, worn out, emotionally drained. I fall to my knees, apologize, crying for the first time since she was released from the hospital. “That’s okay,” she says, patting my hand that grips her arm. “Maybe you can come to Oregon later.”

I have fallen short, so very lacking in being the perfect, found child.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SIGNS AND STARS

I didn't know yet why I felt so sick—bloated, depressed, and fatigued—and that I was about to be diagnosed at age thirty-five with an aggressive type of breast cancer. At the time, I was grateful that I'd been given a chance to meet Sheila before she died. Soon, I would speculate that maybe I'd had the chance to meet her, not before she died, but rather before I did.

To escape the stress and guilt of meeting my deathly ill birthmother, my husband Mike and I visited Louisiana for our first time with the lure of a five-night stay at the downtown Marriott if we attended a time-share sales pitch. No obligations, of course. We met in another hotel lobby, and a beautiful African-American woman, a native to New Orleans, led us up to a veranda. We looked past the white wrought-iron balcony to the city, the narrow streets of cobblestone peppered with bougainvilleas and oak canopies, fascinated that the city was below sea level but not underwater. We half-heartedly listened to her pitch, knowing we couldn't afford the hefty monthly payments for a week per year resort vacation. The cock of my husband's head as he leaned his torso toward the saleslady told me that he was being drawn into her pitch. When he began nodding his head, I intervened, trying to distract both of them. "I've heard a lot about voodoo in this city," I say. "Do you know much about the practice?"

This was before I'd studied voodoo, before I read Zora Neal Hurston's travel narrative about evidence of zombies and mysticism, of Haiti's religious and spiritual practices both in conjunction and resistance to Catholicism. This was before I learned

about energy fields surrounding people, before I realized that I must protect myself from negative people, places and things. This was before I have been diagnosed with cancer.

“Many people practice the art of voodoo. It is not a force to be taken lightly.” She paused, ran her golden-brown eyes up and down my body. I knew she knew that I was trying to distract her from making a sale.

At this point, negotiations went sour. We admitted, after hearing about the cost, that we couldn't afford to buy a time share. Maybe someday, we promised. We allowed her to think I was suffering from a hangover, couldn't stay much longer, given my bloated, fatigued appearance. Even though neither one of us had drunk alcohol in over a decade.

Later, Mike and I would wonder about her turn to nastiness, how she gave an Oprah-like disdainful toss of her head, threatened to kick us out of our hotel because we weren't cooperating. Mentioned the voodoo priest she often visited for solutions to problems. Threw us a look of such pure hatred, that we were speechless. We wrote it off to a forceful but poor manipulation technique.

When Mike and I traveled to historic sites around the south, I usually roamed the cemeteries, fascinated with the architectural details of the eclectic sprawl of headstones and grave markers, but during that trip my heart wasn't in snapping photos and scribbling inscriptions. Perhaps I sensed that my associations with the dead were too close to home, since my birthmother was dying while she tried to make arrangements for a liver transplant. Instead, I spent my time in New Orleans walking up and down the boardwalk that runs parallel to the muddy Mississippi River, part of Intercoastal Waterway,

watching boats chug plumes of black smoke and steamboats form cloaks of misty spray. Other times, I hid in my hotel room, suspecting something other than my ill birthmother was off-kilter. My only connection to the Crescent City was watching televised Mardi Gras parades and hearing stories of drunks gripping bottles of Kentucky Bourbon as they staggered down the city's narrow corridors. I took a bus downtown while my husband gambled at Harrah's casino. I wanted to get the feel of Bourbon Street, the aura of it, see if drunks really stumbled down the street day and night.

My wish was fulfilled as I soaked in the French quarter, lingering on narrow streets filled with voodoo gift shops, fortune tellers, java huts, and bars that had deceptively lighthearted ambience. If I could have named my claustrophobia, it would have been overcast gray, like the tombstones. I saw a man pushing his wife in a wheelchair down Bourbon Street, where they paused in front of a shop window that advertised tarot card readings. Her bald head was covered with a sheer black scarf, her complexion a pale gray. Her expression was curiously blank, and as I walked closer, I saw that she had no eyebrows. Cancer patient. The tourists, the locals hanging out on porch steps with empty eyes, the shops with skeleton bones hanging in windows, accentuated my unease, my fear of the place.

Even so, the next day I dragged my husband into a tarot card reader's den. I'd never been before, and I wanted to see if she could read me without my offering any information. As she spread the cards before her, she asked me what I was afraid of. "There's a child here, and a lot of reticence and fear surrounding her." She frowned. "But the fear is coming from you. Do you have kids?"

I explained that I had been married nine months and was a stepmother to a six-year-old from my husband's previous marriage. It never even occurred to me that she could have been sensing the circumstances surrounding meeting, and possibly losing, my birthmother, Sheila. That maybe I was the child she was seeing.

"She needs you. Don't hold back your love," she advised. I finally asked her about my health, explained some of my recent symptoms. She scanned the cards. "I see nothing to worry about health-wise."

Later, during chemotherapy and radiation treatments, I would feel as if I had fallen into an abyss of drinking and despair, the way I had when I was younger. Sometimes I wondered if I'd been cursed; other times, I remembered the trip as a forewarning. Sometimes I thought it had been a reminder not to put too much stock into curses, mystics, and fortune tellers.

"It's just a pebble-sized cyst," Maile said, a week after we returned from New Orleans, as she lightly probed my breast while I sat on her examination table. She was a massive, cheerful Hawaiian woman with glossy black hair that flowed past her rear. We became friends while playing co-ed softball, before I began seeing her as my physician. She frowned as she looked at my fibrocystic history. "Let's order a mammogram, though, just to be safe."

While the lump my husband had found one evening hadn't hurt before the mammogram, it was throbbing afterwards, which I thought was a sure sign it was a cyst. Malignant breast tumors, various gynecologists had informed me, aren't normally

painful. I looked at my watch while I waited for the technician to show the radiologist my x-rays, wanting to get the appointment over with so I could go on to my cleaning jobs, maybe attend yoga class, then go home and fix the chicken thawing on the counter. I wanted life to return to normal, to quiet, which it hadn't been since Sheila had returned to Oregon, after being hospitalized in Florida for cirrhosis of the liver. I wanted to call her, see if she'd made any progress with beginning treatment, or getting on a liver transplant list.

Finally the technician returned, leading me into the radiologist's dark office, where he was examining my x-rays mounted on a luminous viewing box. He tapped the box with his pen, telling me that the left breast had a mass of two centimeters in diameter with an abundant sprinkle of calcifications, which was massive in terms of tumors. The calcifications looked like a small galaxy of stars against the darkened sky of my breasts. The Milky Way, I thought. I was peripherally aware of the female technician hovering just behind my elbow, watching my expression. I ignored her, smiling stupidly when the radiologist said, "You are still a young woman." He glanced at the chart. "Only thirty-five. If you have children, or want children, you need to have this taken out." He clacked the pen on the box again, this time with more force. "You want to be around for them, don't you?"

I didn't quite understand what he was saying. My painted smile remained fixed as I thanked them both, mumbled that I would make an appointment with my physician right away. I stumbled out of the office, away from the malevolent viewing box. I drove home, aimed for the garage, ended up crunching my car's front left fender into the stucco.

I stared at the small dent, the scratches of white against charcoal gray. Mike came out the garage door, shaking his head over the fender, but more concerned with the mammogram. He waited for me to tell him it was just a false alarm. "I think it's bad," I whispered.

Two days later, Madonna's new CD, *Ray of Light*, was tinkling and chiming in the background as I dog-paddled in my swimming pool. While I spent plenty of evenings dancing to her eighties pop music in nightclubs, I'd never really admired her song writing and musical compositions until recently, since I've become a stepmother. The satiny blue sheen of the CD cover reminded me of the sparkling reflection of our kidney-shaped pool. I listened to the lyrics, written after the birth of her first child, reflecting her growth as a woman and mother. *Nothing takes the past away/like the future/Nothing makes the darkness whole/like the light.* I thought of immersion, of aqua blue water, of my stepdaughter, of my birthmother. All three of us loved swimming, something Momma, my adoptive mother, feared; and in between college classes and house cleaning jobs, I always swam a few laps every day. I am obsessed by the gurgling pool, the security of the six-foot fence, the cassia butterfly plants that are dripping yellow buds onto the deck and into the pool. As I listen to the lyrics, *Traveling down my own road/watching the signs as I go/think I'll follow the sun/isn't everyone...*, I reached out of the water, plucking a few buds in my fingers as if I were capturing one of the yellow sulphur butterflies dancing around the bush.

The fear lay dark and dank at the pit of my stomach, but I didn't contemplate what-ifs at the time. Instead, I reassured myself in my blue liquid sanctuary: My biological mother never had breast cancer. I was thirty-five, not in my late forties or early

fifties, which statistics showed were the most common ages when breast malignancy strikes. I quietly settled on the fact, insisted upon, the case of youth. Statistics from the American Cancer Society listed the five-year survival rate after treatment (including surgery and other adjuvant therapies) of early-stage breast cancer patients as 97 percent. I dismissed the question of what treatments insure that percentage of survival. I clung to cling to the divine *ignorance is bliss* motif of my teens and twenties during which I was deliciously immortal and nothing would ever erase life as I knew it.

I sank back into floating position in the sparkling pool, listening to the gurgling of the pool pump, ignoring my reflection in the glass door. No, I had never borne children, and, yes, I was over thirty, which supposedly increased the risk. My maternal aunt, Sheila's sister, died of cancer at age thirty-one.. While the cancer had spread through her body by the time she was diagnosed, the doctors were pretty sure it had started in her ovaries or uterus.

I was certain that whatever happened, the pool would save me. I couldn't dream, or even imagine, the refuges I would explore to fight for my life, and my sanity.

Four days later, the written diagnosis revealed two things I didn't want to see, the bold typed letters staring at me coldly: "Recommendation: Excisional biopsy...Final Assessment: highly suspicious of malignancy." Before I saw the report, the tapping of the radiologist's pen against the image of my breast, *it is a lump and it needs to come out right away, just to be safe*, didn't carry the same weight as seeing my diagnosis in black and white. Before, I could afford to entertain speculation about *what if it's malignant*,

because of course I didn't believe it. My *what-ifs* at that point were more dramatic and quickly thought, as if imagining the worst would expel the worry. And it did. Until after I met with Dr. Collins, the surgeon assigned to my case.

The biopsy results indicated that I had infiltrating ductal carcinoma, intermediate to high nuclear grade with associated necrosis. The aggressive tumor would need chemotherapy in addition to surgery, since it was a Stage II tumor, growing rapidly. I remained politely and graciously in shock, thanking my surgeon for the news.

Maile's composure was shaken when I dropped by her office after the surgeon's visit. We didn't mention the fact that she called my two-centimeter-plus tumor a two-millimeter sized pebble. She opened the palm of her ample hand, displaying a small wooden cross. I was numb, mind racing, hearing the words "wood shavings" and "from Hawaii." I nodded, feigning awe as she continued. "It has special protective and healing properties. I want you to request the operating room team to tape this cross to your forehead prior to the surgery. It will keep away the evil spirits." I was surprised by this side of her, her faith that something other than standard medicine could help me.

Later, I researched the history of healing properties of wood carvings from native Hawaiian trees. I found a Polynesian tree, commonly known as Pandanus. According to legend, the hala tree is abundant because of the wrath of Madame Pele, the fire goddess and ruler of Hawaii's volcanoes. Apparently, when Pele first set her canoe upon the shores, it became tangled in the leaves and roots of the hala tree. In her anger she ripped the tree to pieces and threw them across the island, and the hala began to grow wherever it touched ground.

I wondered about angering a fire goddess and a ruler of volcanoes. I was wary of talismans that seemed related to New Age mysticism, but since I was a Christian I decided that it couldn't hurt to wear the cross. The spirit of Maile's concern could only benefit. I needed all the prayers, potions, rituals, and alternative treatments that I could get. Later I would go into surgery requesting the cross be taped to my forehead, indifferent to the raised eyebrows of the surgical staff, thinking of Madame Pele, wondering how far the hala tree's roots could stretch across land, under the ocean. I hoped Pele would cloak me with her protection.

A day after Dr. Collins advised surgery, Sheila's brother called with the news that my birthmother was on a respirator in ICU in Portland, Oregon. In a coma. She was having severe abdominal pain, which the doctor apparently diagnosed as spontaneous peritonitis, which is the inflammation of a two-layer membrane of the abdominal cavity or wall. Her lowered immune system apparently couldn't handle a scratch from one of her cats. I wondered which cat it was—Red, Silky, or Zeke, all of which she'd sent me photos of. I in turn had sent her photos of my pets—a cockatiel and parakeet. "She's going downhill fast," Ron said.

I marveled at the miracle, and hell, of finding her, and yet both of us incredibly ill, and her in the process of dying when I met her. I'd had a premonition, or intuition, a year earlier that she might be in serious trouble, that I wouldn't have much time to find her, which prompted me to call Washington State, where I was born, again requesting my birth records, working harder than ever to find her.

When she stepped off the plane from Oregon, she'd embraced me and I had cried in her arms, having not been cradled there since the day I was born, September 14, 1962, when she was permitted to hold me, to check out fingers and toes and otherwise assure herself I was a normal baby. We hadn't met again until June 1999.

I was too sick to fly three thousand miles to Oregon alone, and my husband had to stay in Florida to run his construction business. So I wrote a letter to Sheila in care of her sister Dolly—to thank her for coming to Florida, to commiserate with her illness. To coax her to use positive visual imagery, to think about lavender, lilies, and butterflies, her favorites. To tell her I was sure she'd receive a healing surge of energy within a day. To not worry about the lump I'd told her about over the phone four short days ago, the day the cat probably scratched her. The day after Dolly stood over her comatose body in the hospital reading the letter, the siblings took Sheila off the respirator, with an order to not resuscitate. She took her last breath at age fifty-four.

The breeze blew my hair back and the vibrating buzz of the moped soothed me as I clutched my husband's waist, leaning against his warm, muscular back. He'd suggested a weekend getaway to Grand Bahamas Island to allay the worry of this foreign, cold word hovering in the back of our throats, our tongues: *cancer*; and to forget my birthmother's death the day before. It was as if, by the speed of the bike down a one-lane road to the tip of the island hanging over the ocean, we could outrun my diagnosis, Sheila's demise, my guilt over not flying to Oregon for the funeral. The sultry smell of the island hit me, salt mixed with conch fritters frying in oil. We wound closer to the northern tip of the island,

where Bahamian vendors were setting out their wares in poorly constructed shacks on the west side of the road. Straw basket and yarn-woven purses swayed, and pink and red-ribboned hats streamed with the ocean breeze. To our right, mounds of freshly discarded conch shells were piled five feet high. Their insides, excavated of meat, were nipple-pink, wet and glistening in the sun.

We parked at a stretch of beach, secluded except for the wild dogs that occasionally slunk by, sniffing the sand for something edible. As Mike and I snorkeled, circling a small reef a few feet offshore, I felt more alive than I had in weeks. Yellow and black sergeant majors and silver pin fish flitted around the orange coral, around us. The salty water surrounded me like a balm. My breasts blended with my body into the ocean; whole, no separate parts to consider. Then I surfaced, yanking off my snorkeling gear, abandoning the liquid world. I floated on my back, wondering if my breasts looked like Sheila's. I'd never seen hers. My breasts were round and buoyant in the salt water, rising to the surface, nipples kissing blue sky.

Shortly before my mother's death and my cancer diagnosis, I became obsessed with searching for anything I could find about Coos Bay, Oregon, where she had lived for over twenty years. It was my way of dealing with the guilt of not having returned to Oregon with her when she begged me to go, to help take care of her. I was also grieving over the fact that she was probably dying, but I hoped to visit the beautiful Oregon coast that she had described to me with such passion. Mermaids had become my favorite collectible, so I also searched for figurines and watercolors of bare breasted woman with

flowing hair and scaly fish tales. I bought a print entitled “Mermaid of Coos Bay” by Cathy Peek, who used nautical charts on which to paint various forms and shapes.

The outline of the mermaid spanned an area of Coos Bay, roughly beginning several miles inland and reaching out to the Pacific coast. Her left arm stretched out across the ocean. Her fanned hair is painted in brown smudgy swirls across the chart, curving around the outline of various township and street details. Its translucence gives it the appearance of being underwater. Her abnormally elongated body fits the natural curves the chart’s progress, her eyes are closed, and the chin rounded and disproportionately large so it could follow the curves of the sand dunes. The bare nipples point over Hungryman Cove, and her lower body, scaled in aquas and teals, ends in the lower range of North Bend, Oregon. Next to her are compass markings, which are penciled in the form of a stingray, painted gray. Traced into the various chart markings are pink watercolor splotches representing shells scattered about, along with jelly fish, lobster and other sea life. During the next six months, I would stare at the print for hours. I had used a map to pinpoint the exact location of Sheila’s home in Coos Bay. I finally found it, embedded below the mermaid’s right armpit.

I glided through the sun-drenched pool, savoring the cool weightlessness of immersion during a muggy August afternoon. I paused, allowing my feet to sink to the bottom to gain a foothold in the shallow end, and glanced toward the tinted sliding glass doors leading into the house. My body was caught in the glass’s reflection. Moisture stood in beads on my chest, the curves of water dripping from the roundness of my

breasts, running in rivulets between my slight cleavage. I remembered going to lunch with a group of my thirty and forty-something year old girlfriends, and the topic turned to our breasts, which were starting to droop and lose some of their elasticity and perkiness. “Try this test,” my friend Suzanne said. “If you put a pencil in the crease underneath your boob, against your ribs, and it stays stuck there, you’re in big trouble.” I remember the peals of laughter as we dug pencils and pens from our purses and piled into the bathroom stalls at Bennigan’s. I remember our lamenting shrieks when the writing utensils remained captured in the creases of our skin. When I got home, undressing for the evening, I looked in the mirror for the umpteenth time, fretting about the faint ribbons of stretch marks that had materialized during a teenage growth spurt, when I was seventeen.

As I watched my chest’s reflection in the smoky glass, I saw nothing but perfect and feminine beauty in them. Suddenly, I embraced the slight droop, the stretch marks, which seemed nothing in contrast to losing one or both breasts during my upcoming surgery, should Dr. Collins find the cancer had spread further.

Beginning with the trip to New Orleans when I glimpsed the wheelchair-bound cancer patient, it seemed that everywhere I turned, there was cancer. I read an essay, “Cancer Becomes Me,” by Marjorie Gross. She wrote, “So it hasn’t been all bad. I’ve done things I never would have done before...I used to get used to the word “someday,” but now I figure someday is for people with better gene pools.” Two months after her essay was published in *The New Yorker*, she died from ovarian cancer, the same disease that killed her mother.

When thumbing through a literary journal, my knees went weak when I opened it to a photo essay with a series of black and white photographs of a woman who had a double mastectomy. The cropped photo showed a woman from the neck down to the waist, holding two large leaves over her chest where her breasts had been. I flipped to another black-and-white taken in the woods. Her lean body was fully framed, her back to the camera, as she walked uphill, her long dark trench coat flowing behind her. The only skin showing was her round, bald head. I thought it should be labeled “Turning Her Back on Death.”

Days later, I searched for the journal for another look, but couldn’t find it anywhere in the house. I’d hidden it somewhere, tucked it away as I wanted to conceal my memory of her body, the way the scars zig-zagged across her chest. That’s not me, I thought. Only a lumpectomy. I’m not losing my breasts. I’m not dying.

That night in my dream, my husband yelled at me, “Watch out, it’s coming toward you, move out of the way *now*.” I was frozen in terror before I struggled awake with a high-pitched, squeaky scream, jerking the covers over my head, reverting to my fool-proof childhood method of keeping the monsters at bay, or in this case, a black-cloaked, breast-less bald woman. My husband stirred and rubbed my back before we drifted toward slumber again.

The sharp cut of the idea of cancer hovered around my husband and me as we circled each other during our daily routines. One minute we were soft-spoken, gentle, whispering endearments in each other’s ears; the next, I was politely asking him to take

out the garbage. Sure, Mike said, too eagerly. Sometimes we avoided each other's eyes, as if by acknowledging each other, we might embrace the fact that I was ill. Other times, we argued about normal stuff, like who was going to pick up Ashley from school or arrange for a plumber to fix the dripping bathroom sink. As we waited for my surgery and treatments to commence, to feel out the odds of me living or dying, our eyes grew glassy. Like the walking dead. Then we would make love just as fiercely as we hurled accusatory words at one another, venting the frustration and feeling guilty at the same time, but knowing the anger had to be purged.

I tried to be brave and matter-of-fact in the presence of my stepdaughter, Ashley, explaining that I would need surgery to remove a breast lump, that I would need to take medicine to heal. She was on the edge of seven years old, nodding stoically, saying she didn't have any questions to ask.

My parents flew in from Oklahoma to be with us during my surgery on August 9, a lumpectomy to remove the tumor, an ancillary dissection to take lymph node samples from my armpit to see if the cancer had metastasized. I clutched the wooden cross Maile had given me. My husband was silent and brooding while we sat in the out-patient surgery center. Daddy was trying to be calm and conversational, and Momma fought back tears.

I had felt brave—but now, after twelve hours without food or drink or gum, and three hours after my surgical appointment, the nurse said there would be further delay. Dr. Collins' current surgery was taking longer than expected. With that news, along with

my husband snapping at me to quit squirming, I stomped outside to lean against the brick building, have a good crying fit. Not long after, a nurse popped her head out the door. Apparently my mother had done her own stomping, telling the nurse she'd better get me calmed down or I was going to cut and run. The nurse was very kind, and before I knew it I had a needle in my arm administering two milligrams of soothing sedative and I was on top of the world.

Then I was on the operating table staring into the huge bright round light above me, thinking *no wonder people see a white light even in their anesthetized sleep, because it appears larger than a harvest moon...* before mumbling my last words in answer to the bustling surgical team's string of questions to determine, by my answers or lack of, whether I'm still conscious.

Sheila is there in my frame, shining in a border of grayish-black shadows and dim light. Her face hovers next to mine, and she looks larger than life and more peaceful than when she was living on earth. Her face has lost the orange tinge caused by the liver disease, and is a creamy, natural pale. Her blue blouse is a jeweled color, a shade I've never seen, not even in the jeweled aqua depths of the Bahamian waters.

Then she says, I have to leave now. You'll be okay. I have urgent work elsewhere. Her smile lessens and a slight wrinkle furrows her brow, as if contemplating the tasks ahead. Then she fades away, receding into a tunnel of light.

"Don't go, please don't go," I wept, telling the nurse standing by my bedside that my mother, who has been dead only three days, was there with me. She listened quietly and asked if I want some crackers and a drink.

I don't know how long I lay there, thinking about Sheila visiting me, but later I found out that the surgery had lasted three hours instead of one. "Your lymph nodes were clustered together," Dr. Collins, who would abruptly leave his practice within a week, said. "I couldn't take a sampling of them. They all had to come out."

I was finally wheeled out of what I thought was a curtained area separating the rows of beds (my husband later tells me there were no privacy curtains) to a nearby waiting area, groggy and listless, trying to explain to my ghost-white parents and husband about Sheila's visit. As we passed the rows of recovering patients, I heard a girl weeping loudly, sobbing as if she was expressing every pain or loss there ever has been or could be. An older woman's voice, perhaps her mother, tried to shush her quickly, as if she were embarrassed by the girl's outburst as she woke up from anesthesia. I understood how the girl felt. No matter how diseased or unwelcome the tumor was, my body grieved the loss of my partially excavated breast, along with the healthy lymph nodes wrenched from my armpit.

"Let her cry," I mumbled as my reclining chair was wheeled out to my husband's truck. I couldn't walk, and felt like a crate on a hydraulic lift, or maybe one of those high lift dump boxes. As Mike, with the help of an attendant, tried to help me out of the chair, I felt like liquid, oozing down, my feet catching ground. Mike steadied me, guiding me to the passenger seat as my anguished parents hovered in wispy background colors, over us.

Three days after my surgery, my parents were coaxing me to finish the arm exercises I'd been given when the package arrived. I was inching my hand up the kitchen

wall, dutifully performing the painful exercises to regain my mobility and prevent lymphedema, a common problem among patients who have lymph nodes removed. The immune system is compromised by the disrupted lymph node flow, and swelling and infection can plague the limb, in this case my left arm. I was landlocked, unable to swim until my incisions heal. Eventually I would gain complete, though not painless, mobility in my left arm by swimming lap after painful lap in the pool, but for then, I crawled my hand from waist high to clock high, scrabbling my fingers up the wall like a spider, when Dad brought in the box, my legacy from Sheila. Or, more accurately, from her sister, Dolly, who had supervised the selling and dividing of my birthmother's belongings. Daddy helped me open the modest-sized box, afraid that I would injure myself with the box cutters because of my weakened and clumsy state.

My surgery was pronounced "successful" since none of the lymph nodes contained cancer, and the lumpectomy removed all the malignancy. I irritably rubbed my aching arm, staring at the opened box and watching my parents pretend not to be jealous or curious as I used my right arm to carry the box to my bedroom. I had to be alone, to conduct my initial, perfunctory search of what her family hadn't sold or divided among themselves. To see what treasures I could glance over, bury, dig up later when I was well. There was a note from Sheila's siblings. Though later there will be bitter claims among the squabbling siblings that the will was altered, and that Claudine's crack head grandkids took all of Sheila's jewelry out of the safe before everyone arrived, of which I'll mercifully be no part of, Sheila had left a note to send the items enclosed.

There was a Marshfield Pirates hat, purple and gold, that she wore to the local high school softball team she loved to root for. Strands of white and black cat hair still clung to the felt cap. All sorts of angel and eagle pins were attached to the hat. I unpinned an angel, which I would later wear to every chemo treatment. Next was a small bag from Epcot Center, when she visited me, when we roamed Epcot, she half delirious with the toxicity of her liver. I quickly looked inside at the leather pouch with the price tag still attached, remembering that moment in front of the vender, when Sheila spilled all her coins and dropped her change purse and I berated her for not watching her belongings more closely. When I didn't know she was confused because she was sick.

I set the bag aside, with the cap, and the other treasures—a dried lily from her memorial service, silver bird pins, a tapestry of a cockatoo. Her journal books, each with two or three pages of entries during different Januarys, when she'd made resolutions to write a book. Small bears, one named Pretty Punch. They sat smiling in tiny wicker chairs. More silver bird pins. A small porcelain doll for Ashley. A gold pocket watch for Mike. The last photo taken of us together in Florida before she returned to Oregon, to her cats, to resign from her school district job as a bus driver, to lure her sister, Claudine, with the gift of her camper and car to come down from Bothell, Washington to take care of her. Before she returned to Oregon to get her affairs in order, then die.

And at the bottom was the ring. The note said Sheila wanted me to have it—it was a compilation of diamonds she had collected over the years. I'd never owned such a beautiful ring. It was like looking at her life in a sparkle of stones, a life haunted with regrets.

I wondered what else I'd inherited—the cancer. I couldn't deny that two siblings had died of cancer—Nancy, the oldest sister, when she was thirty-one. I worried about the liver disease. Sheila and I had both drunk excessively for ten years before quitting. Was cirrhosis what I had to look forward to, if I made it through the breast cancer? Maybe the cancer was caused by environmental factors, all those years of eating peanut butter and pasta and not enough vegetables, or standing in front of a microwave I had used daily for a decade, the one I stood over waiting while the food cooked, my left breast inches from the humming oven. Maybe my errant cells were from a more recent insult, the past few years that I inhaled toxic chemicals I used to clean houses. Maybe it was from drinking. Maybe it was from a combination of both my genetics and my environment. My past, and my history.

I put Ashley's and Mike's gifts in my curio cabinet, along with Pretty Punch, the bear with lavender rickrack around her throat. I replaced the rest of my legacy into the box and shoved it into a closet. I would look at my treasures later, when the pain of the past and present wasn't so overwhelming. I would wear Sheila's ring, counting the three oval diamonds surrounded by the small stones as I counted the three days since she'd been gone. I willed it to be my talisman rather than my nemesis.

In late August, I was lying on my husband's ex-wife's massage table, trying to relax. Ashley's mother, Barb, is a licensed massage therapist who also practices Reiki, an ancient healing practice believed to have begun in Tibet thousands of years ago. When she found out I had been diagnosed with cancer, she offered to perform the healing

session, which focuses on rebalancing energies that are misplaced throughout the body in order to restore health. She rubbed her hands together, supposedly gathering energy, and placed them an inch over each breast. I felt heat between her hands and my chest, but I couldn't tell if she was drawing any toxins from my body, or if she was giving me positive energy. I prayed silently, to be open-minded, to be protected from any residue of bad feeling that Barb has had in the past, before she accepted the fact that her ex-husband was re-marrying.

I don't feel any cancer, she murmured, asking me to concentrate on receiving a golden ball of energy from her hovering hands. *Your lumpectomy removed all of it.*

When I went home later that day, I felt rejuvenated, but it wasn't until months later that I really believed. When a mutual acquaintance, Izzy, lay newly diagnosed with liver cancer in the hospital, on the same floor that Sheila had been admitted to for cirrhosis, Barb and I went to see her. She laid her hands above Izzy's liver, sending energy to her body.

"It was cold," Barb said later, when I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer and asked her what she had felt. "Her liver couldn't receive energy. It was stone cold, shut off from the light."

A week later Izzy died.

I walked around the house bare-breasted even though I was supposed to be wearing a support bra at all times after my surgery. Around my neck I wore shiny black hematite stones around my neck that are supposed to have healing properties. I rebuked

the devil causing mischief in my body in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son, the Father, the Holy Spirit. I thought about a short story I'd written years earlier entitled "The Darkness of Stars," when I learned Tina, one of my close friends, might have throat cancer. Thankfully, it was a false alarm, but before I knew that, I attempted to conjure something I hadn't experienced. I wrote about how the white blood cells were battling with the red, like glinting, circular swords. Like twinkling stars that threaten to extinguish Tina's vocal cords, erase the searing lump of pain in her throat. Like a seagull disguised as an angel hovering in the ocean breeze, bearing down on her body as she walked along the shore.

It wasn't even close to the fear I felt, how the word *cancer* slid from my tongue like the slice of a knife.

In the dream, I was standing naked in front of the mirror, staring at the two-inch scar on the bottom portion of my left breast. I had previously felt optimistic that the lumpectomy didn't cause much noticeable disfigurement, but as I continue to stare at my reflection, I realize my breast is severely cratered. I decide I'm going to fix this problem because it is unacceptable. I could have handled the slight indentation that only Mike and I would notice, but not this *crater*. I somehow painlessly cut it open, with what tools I don't know, and start stuffing small square Styrofoam blocks into the hole. When my breast feels full, I close the large gash by smoothing my fingers over the area. It looks normal again, and I am relieved.

During the next three to six weeks, what will be my conditions surrounding my chemotherapy treatment? I wrote. I had been learning about the significance of various tarot cards since my encounter with the tarot card reader in New Orleans. I had been browsing a New Age bookstore in downtown Melbourne, looking for books on healing, eyeing the cards. I finally gave in, buying a set of tarot cards with a delicious sense that it was forbidden, like when I was studying Christianity and our bible study teacher told us that Ouija Boards, tarot cards, and the like could open the door to evil. Christians do not believe in using mediums or channels to search for God. We must find the strength within, through God, to deal with our lives. The problem was I didn't have much strength physically, mentally, or spiritually after my surgery and first chemotherapy treatment.

When I got home, I sat cross-legged on the bed, shuffling the cards. I chose an eleven-card spread to get an overall idea of the conditions surrounding my treatments within the next three to six weeks. The five of hearts told me that disappointment can create a segway to future success. Illusion, the seven of hearts card, revealed that I was surrounded by the confusion between reality and escape. That made sense to me. My lack of Patience blocked me, and my foundation lay in Intuition, according to the High Priestess card I'd drawn. Generosity was behind me; apparently my battle was all about me. Finally, what my challenge was, what I faced, was the Seven of Wands: Courage. I had to move forward despite my fear, and defend what I held dear. My family, my life.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SEEING STARS

While waiting for my chemotherapy treatment, I traced my fingers around the surgically implanted port in my chest wall, which would be used to insert IVs. The port was a thick, round piece of plastic that felt like half a grape, stretching my skin. From the port, a catheter led somewhere under my collarbone, snaked around until it rested in a vein. It was alien, and my nerves and muscles told me so for months after surgery. My neck and shoulder felt dislocated, probably from a pinched nerve, the surgeon said, and no amount of Lortab eased the discomfort. My body had taken on a separate entity, rebelling of its own accord, sending frantic messages to my brain, which took a step back from my body, pondering this foreign state of affairs.

As I watched for his reaction, I often told my husband, Mike, that the port looked like an alien implant. He smiled and lied, saying it wasn't *that* noticeable. I showed the round bump to all my friends, hiding my insecurity, joking that I didn't have to dress up for Halloween. Once I lost my hair, all I would need to complete my costume was green body paint. Unfortunately, when Halloween rolled around, I was curled up on the sofa, lingering in the shadows of the living room, reading Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* while my husband passed out candy to the trick-or-treaters.

After the port was installed, I reported to Dr. McClure, my medical oncologist. He was a tall, sandy-brown bearded man with mournful blue eyes. I grew to hate him. My surgeon had recommended him because he was the only oncologist that also sported a PhD behind the MD. While my husband Mike and I sat holding hands in his office, he gravely explained the statistics of receiving the aggressive treatment for my Stage II

Grade III cancer. While the tumor had been removed and had not metastasized to the lymph nodes in my left arm, Dr. McClure couldn't be sure that the cells hadn't broken off to conduct their own search and destroy mission. Research indicated that breast cancer tends to spread to the lungs and bones first. The cells never stop growing and dividing, he said, distinguishing a normal cell from a cancer cell. I imagined millions of mutated, multiplying cells. The drugs would kill them, along with quite a few normal white blood cells.

Among my chemotherapy options included a lighter dose of chemo administered, that wouldn't interfere with my daily functions as much as the more aggressive treatment. However, Dr. McClure said the chances of the cancer returning decreased with the larger doses. When he quoted a twenty-percent difference between the two, naturally I wanted that extra chance to live. When I asked him about side effects, he wouldn't commit to any particulars, other than I'd most likely lose my hair. Every patient was different, he said.

I was brave in his office, somewhat relieved to learn I definitively had cancer. Part of the relief stemmed from not having to wonder and wait any longer; part of my mindset was that I would conquer this disease, pass with flying colors, resist all side effects, re-enter the world healed. I had no idea that experience would show me what knowledge and confidence never could.

My husband drove me to the oncology center for chemotherapy the morning of August 26, 1999. I would receive a high dosage of Adriamycin and Cytosin once every three weeks for three months, then graduate to Taxol once every three weeks for three

months. Those intravenous drugs would be followed by thirty-three treatments of radiation under the guidance of my radiation oncologist, Dr. Golden.

I stared at the Chemo Room's neutral Formica floor and mint and peach patterned wallpaper, designed to soothe, and the recliners filled with afghan-covered patients. The floors and wallpaper began to dim, narrowing my vision, much like the end title of a Looney Tunes cartoon where the cameo circle of Bugs or Porky or Elmer fades to black. The only focus was when the nurses would change the IV bag for the next dose of medication, and later how I would deal with the nausea, lack of appetite and energy, and the physical and emotional pain. I felt like I was floating down a water sinkhole that pulsed yet deceived me with its silence, reminding me of my last years of drinking. I would either black out or pass out, eliminating the physical and emotional discomfort, at least until the next morning's hangover.

After eleven years of no alcohol or drugs, other than antibiotics, my system was overloaded with mind and body-altering substances. At first, I thought I was getting to enjoy the effects of a free drunk. "Free" meant that I hadn't "slipped" or "fallen off the wagon." A free drunk or high is what some recovering alcoholics and addicts jokingly reference when we are prescribed pain medications which mysteriously trigger our faulty neurotransmitters. The inept transmissions caused us to crave more, to feel giddy and uninhibited, or sleepy and depressed, depending on exactly what signal makes it through. As the chemotherapy drugs streamed through the port implanted in my chest, the familiar tingling in my bloodstream and the euphoric state of silliness felt like inebriation.

I never saw either of my parents drunk. Momma didn't drink, and the only time Dad ever imbibed was on a Sunday while working in the yard. The only evidence that my parents ever drank to inebriation is second hand, immortalized in a series of photos in which my father, with a new haircut and an eerie resemblance to Robert Reed, is uncharacteristically dancing in the kitchen during his fortieth birthday party. He looks oddly happy and uninhibited, as does Momma, who is giggling. I was ten years old, and curious about cocktails, which sounded very *glamorous*, and sneaked out of bed to watch the gaiety for a while. I remember feeling a bit disappointed the next morning, finding the kitchen sparkling clean, with no half-full glasses of booze lying around for me to sample.

At Dad's birthday party, Momma had served shrimp appetizers at the party, but after that night, she never touched another shrimp again, claiming that was what made her sick and break into hives. I suspect otherwise, remembering her warnings over the years, *I almost became an alcoholic, but when I met your dad, he put the screws to my drinking, Thank God. Always be careful and aware of where it can lead you.* However, the unspoken words always seemed to be, *You must control your drinking, because only God knows what your family history is, and where that 15-year old who put you up for adoption came from.*

Allergy as it relates to alcohol intolerance can be defined in different ways, and I believe the word is used to show that those who cannot stop drinking do react differently than normal drinkers. The allergy can refer to the flushed, rash-type symptoms commonly called Asian Flush. This response is due to increased levels of acetaldehyde in the blood.

The different types of the brain's chemical reactions are complex, but the importance of the word "allergy" helps to shift the focus from quitting by will power alone. Alcoholism is a disease just as much as cancer is, sometimes with similar alternative treatment methods, and hereditary plays a role in both.

When Momma would call me from Oklahoma to see how I was holding up during my cancer treatments, fretting about the damage they caused me by second hand smoke (they smoked three packs a day for the eighteen years I lived with them), I brushed away her guilt.

"Breast cancer, like alcoholism, is probably hereditary," I said. "And we both know that my biological family was plagued with all sorts of disease."

If it wasn't heart disease, which killed my grandparents, probably as a result of drinking, it was cancer. A biological uncle, Sonny, had died of cancer when he was in his forties. My biological aunt, Nancy, died of cancer when she was thirty-one years old. All but one of my birthmother's living siblings still drank. I felt lucky to be alive, not to mention sober, at thirty-six.

I had kept a journal during and after my breast cancer treatments, but I tried to avoid writing in the Chemo Room, as I'd nicknamed it. No matter what mood I was in, the pre-chemo drugs pumped into my system, Ativan, Tagamet, and Benadryl, deepened my anxiety. The pre-chemo drugs had prevented a repeat of an unexpected seizure after the first treatment, when Teri, a kind-hearted acquaintance who was between jobs, agreed

to watch me so my husband could return to work. Bewildered Teri ended up having to put something (a sponge? my post-surgery breast pillow?) between my chattering teeth, trying to hold my convulsing body down on the bed with her short, petite frame while frantically dialing Dr. McClure, as my temperature rose to one hundred and four degrees.

I was weary of watching human, aged mirrors of myself, and my treatment hadn't yet started. Stay calm, stay calm, stay clam, I scribbled, over and over on my notepad, until I'd filled a page. I knew if I stopped writing I would lose what control I had left.

When I was a child and Momma took me to doctors for various problems, they always said I was imagining or dreaming my symptoms. The optometrist, until he actually checked my eyes, thought I was faking my blurred vision because I wanted to wear glasses. My general physician had said my monthly fainting episodes, which were caused by anemia during my periods, were a play for attention.

So I was careful to be an agreeable, willing participant. I didn't tell the doctor that I was a recovering alcoholic. Sheila's experience also tinged my decision, when it seemed that her Oregon physician had given her up as a lost cause. He hadn't even suggested the possibility of a liver transplant. All he saw on her chart was alcoholic, even though she only drank for ten years, same as me, and had quit a decade earlier. I walked around in a daze, but my world was half-asleep when Sheila died. I knew I needed to go on, and I tried, through the chemo, to pretend as if it never happened, that we never met, that I was never adopted, that I never found my birthmother.

Despite a family environment free of alcohol, when my best friends, Angela and Gay, invite me on a campout in Angela's wooded backyard at age fifteen, I decided to loosen one of three strict creeds of abstinence from drinking, smoking, and sex before marriage. What could one experiment hurt, after all?

That was the night I met my first true love, alcohol. Sitting cross-legged in the tent, we listened to Meatloaf's *On a Hot Summer Night* about twenty times, not really getting the sexual connotations of Meatloaf's query, *Would you offer your throat to the wolf with the red roses?*

"Yes," the throaty, deep-voiced woman cries. *Yes*, I whispered, closing my fingers around the widest part of the bottle of Bacardi Rum, taking a chug, and feeling the fiery liquid burn all the way down. I was kneeling in the tent, Angela and Gay looking at me expectantly, and I cracked some joke I don't remember, and they giggled. Their tinkling laughter was what hooked me. While I can only remember snapshots of passing the bottle around, chanting *we must, we must, we must increase our buzz*, the clarity of being the center of attention, of being ha-ha *funny*, of being the bearer of jokes instead of the brunt of them as I was in grade school and junior high, melted through my brain with the alcohol and lodged itself somewhere between fear of people and self-confidence. Alcohol was an elixir for courage.

Angela and Gay took care of me the rest of the night during that sultry Midwestern summer as I continuously threw up all over pillows and sleeping bags. I remember flashes: Angela, by nature a prissy girl, expressing disgust over her vomit-covered pillow as she scrambled out of the tent and snuck into her house to gather towels;

Gay, a pencil thin girl with large hazel eyes, leading me to a tree far removed from the tent under which to expel this foreign, half-welcome poison, which she later tried to cover with leaves and dirt. They must have realized their folly in initiating me with straight Bacardi Rum in the first place, and neither of them, to my knowledge, ever reacted to alcohol the way I did that night. Angela and I would go out drinking, and she always drove because she didn't seem to be impaired. The only shift in her character was that she giggled more and smoked cigarettes. I never drank with Gay again. I think she woke up sick the next morning, also, and decided alcohol wasn't for her. There was never an indication that any of our respective parents drank more than socially, but there was a catch. I was adopted. God knows what I had inherited.

Since the only side effect Dr. McClure would admit to was that my long blonde hair would begin to fall out approximately two weeks after my initial chemo treatment, I began checking the pillow each morning upon awakening. Nothing. I snickered triumphantly on the fifteenth day: no hair loss. Mr. MD/PhD was mistaken. My willpower and prayers had protected my scalp.

On the sixteenth day, I was running my fingers through my hair, and instead of the usual stray hair coming out in my hands, eight or nine pieces of hair were clumped between my fingers. I stared at the long, light-colored strands. I reasoned that I'd just gotten out of the shower, which had been draining rather slowly—I had reached down and drawn out a wet ball of hair, which encircled my finger like a crown. A few days

later, when I was rummaging in the closet, long strands of hair hung over the darker shirts and sweaters like plastic icicles draped over a Christmas tree.

So two days after my thirty-sixth birthday, I told my husband I needed to get rid of my remaining hair, which was all over the house and on the seats of our vehicles. “Let me do it,” he suggested, when I mentioned going to a barber or hair stylist. Perhaps he felt, as I did, that it was an intimate deed, a ceremony almost; or he may just have been pleased to be able to do *something*. I agreed, dreading the thought of going to a hair salon full of strangers. It would be the equivalent of disrobing before them, and I had done enough of that in front of the nurses and physicians who had become an intimate part of my life.

Mike set up shop on the pool deck with a lawn chair, towel, scissors and shaver. He snipped and snipped; as scraggly as my hair had become, there was still a lot of it. “Now you won’t clog up the drain anymore, or have to vacuum the pillowcase,” he said. He began shaving, slowly, joking that now I’d empathize with his receding hairline. The light touch of his fingers, the soft, slow scrape of the razor against my scalp soothed me, as if he were cradling my head in his hands. When he finished, with not a cut or a scratch on my smooth head, I looked in the bathroom mirror, marveling at the soft stubbles, the nakedness, the freedom of it. I cried quietly, touched by my husband’s tenderness, saddened that I’d been wrong about being able to resist the hair loss, worried about contracting a grave illness less than a year into my marriage. The mirror reflected what I had wanted to deny: Cancer patient. I mourned the hair loss; but my grieving, for who I had thought I was before my diagnosis, had just begun.

My relationships had shifted. The women I felt closest to, the women I'd laughed and wept with, were the ones who seem most alienated from me as my cancer diagnosis and treatments have progressed. My spiritual guide, Gail, who had helped me through ten years of sobriety, told me she was leaving for the summer to go camping and hiking in the Appalachians with her boyfriend.

"You'll be okay, I can feel it," was all she said before she left.

My other friends seemed to need my reassurance that I'd be okay in between telling me to keep a positive attitude and not to quit. They were too close to me—shocked that I had cancer, the surgery, and that I would lose my hair. That I could die in my thirties. Even though I wondered who had pushed away whom, I resolved to stop being strong for my friends. My world with Mike narrowed, and we took the advice one of the other cancer patients had given us: we made plans not to make plans.

I had grown too tired to sound cheerful and caring on the phone when my insides felt like they had been turned inside out with a meat cleaver. Where could I draw the line of false cheer and give up false pride and just be as I was? I thought. My friend Susan made a profound statement. . . *we are not supposed to attempt to control our feelings*. It hit me hard, that I'd been struggling for control, fighting the treatments. But I wanted to direct my emotions, because I feared turning to that pessimistic part of me that projected despair, the black hole I used to sink into when I drank. The years had sped by, years that I didn't have to feel a hangover or the premonition that I was dying for alcohol, from the inside out. Chemotherapy, which I thought would be something like a free drunk, had brought me to that place again.

For months after I'd started chemo, I furiously dusted, cleaned, and organized the house, because my insides felt dark and dank and closed. It was as if those wonderfully *alive* healthy cells that inevitably are erased by the chemotherapy along with whatever malignant cells that remain, were crying out to me in pain and death. They were keeping me awake with their demise.

In October, my friend Lisa sent me a meditation tape when she learned of my insomnia. The tape was a guided meditation on the healing power of angels, which, the author said, protect us. I plugged it in one evening, lying down on the bed. I was to envision my guiding angels surrounding me, helping and protecting me, even though I couldn't see them. The cheery woman's voice urged me to summon colors of the different angels to call forth their healing powers. The Archangel Michael, the spirit of healing, was emerald green. I prayed to them to heal me. I prayed for sleep, but to no avail.

When I came home exhausted from chemo, and later from daily radiation treatments, there was only one thing that helped me sleep, and that was my cockatiel, Coco. Before my treatments, I rarely let him sleep with me when I took an afternoon nap, because he would chirp and preen me by picking bits of flaky skin and whiteheads off my face. Somehow, after my surgery, he sensed that I was ill, if not from the cancer, then from the treatments. He would chirp quietly, a querulous, crying sound if I were in the room and shrilly when he couldn't see me. He would flutter and fly around corners, away from his cage in the family room, to find me. Sometimes the clumsiness of his unevenly

clipped wings sent him soaring into a cabinet or wall. When that happened, if I weren't around to pick him up, he simply waddled around the house until he found me.

A few days after I started listening to the tape, willing the angels to help me daily, I was sitting on the couch, watching Coco fluffed on top of his cage. He cocked his greenish-yellow head, looking at the cream-colored walls, the popcorn ceiling. I moved over to his cage, sure he was watching a gnat or mosquito swirl over his head. There was nothing. Coco was smiling. I could always tell. When I taught him new words or whistles, he would get that head cock, his head feathers at half mast, eyeing me with his dark, round pupils, his wings and body relaxed. Suddenly his head feathers drew erect, and he looked over my shoulder. I spun around, but heard no sounds or saw any movement that would catch his attention that way.

According to Psalm 148:2-5, angels are part of heaven, of supernatural creation, serving God. The name angel means messenger. I wondered if Coco could see them. I offered him a finger, and took him to the bedroom with me once again. He would tuck his head under a downy wing, and sleep as close as he could get to my sweaty bald head, until I awakened. If my husband came into the room to check on me, Coco would quickly hop on my chest, flap his wings and hiss at Mike. I figured that Coco was my angel. My pet birds had been messengers of hope and companionship ever since I had stopped drinking.

During one of my Chemo Room visits, I watch the ceiling, papered with prints: Monet's *Evening Flowers* and *Water Lilies*; Edward Hopper's *Ground Swell*, with a shore-grounded sailboat tilted on its side; and Georgia O'Keefe's *Sunflowers*, the bright

yellow petals exploding from the dark, pulsing center. Actually, I rediscovered the prints every visit and then promptly forgot. My long-term memory was faulty, and later I realized that my sensory memory skipped like a record during those long months of medications. If my brain couldn't process outer stimuli, it couldn't be stored. I continually reviewed journal entries for proof that I wasn't hallucinating or recalling false memories. My short-term memory didn't function well, either, since I would lose a thought seconds after it materialized, my husband having to repeat comments and questions. This was frustrating for both of us. My memory of that period of my life would return in bits and pieces later, but the most intense moments of pain were overwritten, or perhaps reconfigured in a vague, fuzzy way. Reading my journal entries played large parts in recall, but I couldn't shake the sense that another person entirely had written it, much as I felt about the things I did when I was drinking.

Celtic music from my headphones flows along with the steady and precise IV drip. My husband sits quietly on an unoccupied recliner, pretending to read. He knows not to talk much because I am highly excitable. I tell him repeatedly he should be grateful he never saw me drunk, because I'd be happy one minute and a wildcat the next, screaming and throwing things without provocation. Later in my treatment, my erratic behavior would escalate, and he'd see first hand what I'd been like.

“I feel sick.”

“I know.”

“What do you think that Munder stock is worth now?” I was extremely resentful that our adviser had talked us into investing in a high risk stock that had plummeted in value. I also connected Munder with the advisor talking Mike into a life insurance policy. I’m the one who should have bought one

“It’s worthless. Don’t worry about it.”

“That pisses me off.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“That damn financial guy is so full of shit. I wish he’d drop dead.”

“Shhhh. I do too, but lower your voice.”

“Shit. My IV’s empty. Get Colleen’s attention. I don’t want to be here all day.

Let’s start the real stuff.”

“I know. I’ve got some errands after I drop you off.”

“What the fuck. What errands.”

“I told you earlier. Don’t worry about it. Relax. You’ll sleep anyway.”

“No, you know I won’t for hours. I’ll be keyed up, and worthless as tits on a boar.” My Midwestern idioms and dialect frequently kicked in, eerily similar to the lack of inhibition alcohol caused. When I first moved to Florida, I was ashamed of the dialect and twangy sound I’d picked up, and struggled to keep drawling vowels and slurred r’s out of my speech.

“You’ll sleep.”

“The hell I will. I might seize again.”

“Not with all that Benadryl they’re pumping into your system. Relax.” He clutched his unread book in his lap.

“*You* fucking relax. They aren’t pumping poison into *your* system.” I shivered, wrapping the purple afghan closer around my neck.

“You don’t have a choice,” he finally says, looking me in the eye.

I fell silent, drained, and unable to deny his logic. When I used to drink, an unpleasant dialogue such as this would not have ended so peacefully, as I’d discover later as the chemo took its toll. I could control my therapy-induced rage and despair to an extent in the presence of strangers and acquaintances, especially if no one began a conversation with me. I normally didn’t behave this way with the nurses or other patients, except for Bob, a slender, forty-five-ish year-old man with brown hair and calm blue eyes.

Bob had been my financial advisor when I was still single, and I immediately recognized him when he sat down next to me in the Chemo Room. He was being treated for bone cancer. He had relocated to another part of Florida for a few years, he said, and had recently returned to the company, which meanwhile had assigned us to the younger, bumble headed advisor.

I saw Bob again a few weeks later, this time with my friend Suzanne. Unfortunately, she too was highly excitable no matter what the circumstance, and had allowed me to work myself into a giddy frenzy on the way to treatment. By that time, I was taking the corticosteroid Decadron to ward off debilitating effects from my last three months of the drug Taxol. I had flounced in with heavy makeup and a new pink bandana,

loudly greeting the nurses, the older patients who seemed eerily quiet, much as I had been the first three months. Suzanne and I settled in next to Bob.

“This is the man, Suzanne, this is the man,” I babbled, explaining the near-defunct investment shares that Bob would have saved me from had he still been my advisor.

“Bob, you don’t mind if we talk shop, do you, Bob? You don’t, do you, Bob?”

Bob smiled slightly. “No, that’s okay,” he said quietly. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I was breaking a rule, something I wouldn’t have thought twice of when I was drinking, which always resulted in embarrassment and remorse after. This was no different. The only way I could have kept my mouth shut while receiving those drugs was if they would have knocked me out, either with a punch or a tranquilizer.

“Bob, I wonder if you would consider giving me some financial advice on some money from a settlement,” Suzanne asked.

While they talked, with Suzanne batting her eyes at him, I became more sullen and demanding, interjecting, trying to bring the conversation back to the Munder stocks. That was my co-patient, dammit. The result became a competition in what Bob must have perceived as my joining in the flirtation. As Bob boasted that he lifts weights daily at the gym and hadn’t yet lost his hair, I realized that I was jealous. He seemed the perfect candidate as poster man for the American Cancer Society: humble, fit, calm, and competent.

I’m aggrieved by Bob’s quiet countenance and humility as we sit in our recliners. He is probably the only patient who doesn’t need an afghan and who seems impervious to the lowered body temperature induced by the medicine that purportedly kills the cancer

cells, taking quite a number of healthy cells with it. His composure remained steady while I continued to parrot how much I missed his investment advice. Finally, my treatment was over, and Bob looked relieved when the nurse unhooked my IV and smoothed the crumpled red and purple zigzag- patterned afghan for the next patient. As Suzanne leads me out, Bob immediately picks up his Wall Street Journal.

Many times when I drank, conversations with people I envied resulted in a desperate wistfulness, and for a time I would be determined to match their vigilance and success. My vows always fell short, though, because the alcohol handicapped me. Relationships ran to a dead end as friends and boyfriends recoiled from my torrential mood swings. But this was different. Attempting to turn jealousy into inspiration, I supplement my daily swimming laps with step aerobic classes.

Intimate, embarrassing scenes in a favorite movie are the easiest to remember. The memories were like peeping into the neighbors' bedroom window to see them rolling around naked. That's how the clip ran when I closed my eyes and flashed back to 1999: an image of me at the fitness center, stumbling and trying to learn new moves in step aerobics class, since Dr. McClure had imposed no exercise limitations, despite my repeated queries. "Whatever you think you can handle," he said.

I was like a dough shape carved from a cookie cutter, thin, flabby, pasty-skinned, and mentally and physically clumsy, but determined to take shape like Bob, whom I grew to consider my nemesis, my competitor. I was stepping to the beat in aerobics class, then I missed a step, twisted my ankle and crumpled to the ground. Thankfully, my fellow

exercisers took the instructor's cue and continued sashaying to Janet Jackson's *Rhythm Nation*. Flushed with embarrassment, I sat there nursing my ankle until I was escorted out in a wheelchair. Gym policy. My face was beaded with sweat, so I shifted the baby-pink colored bandana covering my baldness lower on my forehead to absorb the moisture and hide my frown. Indignation soon melted into self-pity as I realized my mind is telling me I'm only thirty-six, but my body feels like eighty, and I thought, *maybe this is the closest I'll get to actually knowing what that age feels like*. The last time I remembered thinking that was when, at age twenty-four, I prayed for God to lead me to a quick death because I couldn't live drunk anymore.

Some memories would seem better forgotten, but they illustrated the truth of my alcohol addiction. When I was seventeen, I earned the nickname *Sybil*, after both the nonfiction book and resulting 1977 movie character played by Sally Fields, where a troubled young woman suffers from multiple personality disorder. *Sixteen* different personalities, to be exact. The wide range of emotion that I could experience in an evening of drinking would easily cover that many, if not more.

Just before high school graduation, my peers bestowed this name upon me after a deliriously drunken night at the Southwestern University of Oklahoma. It was college orientation weekend, and the more beer I drank, the more aggressive I became. The street in Weatherford, Oklahoma was full of college students, the air thick with pot smoke and spilled beer, and tunes like Styx, the Rolling Stones, and Foreigner blared from the outdoor speakers. I don't remember where the speakers were, or any of the people. I sat on a curb, having drunk a six-pack of beer on the drive over with several of my friends

and peers for college orientation. I was overwhelmed by the people, terrified of not fitting in, and so drunk that I could barely walk. I focused on Sally, a chubby, hateful girl who taunted me all through high school. She reminded me of the childhood bully who used to follow me home after school and punch me in the stomach until I puked. While Sally never confronted me physically, she would slip in snide remarks, like when I wore my Bee Gees shirt to school every Friday, Is that the only shirt you own? she'd smirk. Another time, jealous because I was the first to be wearing a boy's varsity leather jacket, she pretended to bump into me in the school hallway and ran the pen in her hand down the leather sleeve as she strolled by, leaving a bold blue line that wouldn't come out of the white leather fabric. While not uncommon, and certainly not profound, these memories, along with years of shrinking away from verbal confrontation, bubbled over. I half crawled, half weaved toward her to punch her. I missed. She stepped back, laughing, and Pam, my best friend, drug me to the dormitory room. "You've had enough," she said, mocking the stern teacher voice of her mother.

Alcohol had allowed me to tap into my feelings and react the way I was always afraid to act. "Leave me alone," I screamed at her, locking myself into the dorm room. And then I felt calm, a momentary mood shift, and I let one of the girls in. "We are going to get kicked out if you don't shut up," she said.

"Fuck you and the horse you rode in on!" I screamed, pushing her out of the room and breaking a full bottle of beer on a fake mantle built into the wall.

Later, I stepped on the broken beer glass, and limped downstairs, leaving blood footprints, to report to the house leader and find some Band-Aids. "You haven't learned

your limits,” she said. “Take it easy next time.” I cried, pulling my pink and white-striped tube top over my cleavage, suddenly modest during yet another mood swing. What neither she nor I understood was that once I picked up a drink, I couldn’t stop, much less slow down.

The next morning I woke up to Pam pounding on the door, telling me that if I wanted to ride over to dining room, where the college orientation session was starting, I’d better get a move on. I fumbled around, wincing as I put weight on my foot, still oozing blood. My head throbbed as I headed downstairs and into the excruciatingly bright sunlight. The girls were already driving out of the dorm’s parking lot to the other building. Whether they saw me waving my hands or not, I was left behind.

I stood at a crossroads, dazed and limping, where normal drinkers shake their heads, rationalizing that this memory of sadness and humiliation that alcohol wreaked on a teenaged girl would prevent her from drinking again. That should have been a crystal-clear moment to consider abandoning alcohol, but I only drank more. I didn’t enroll at SU and refused to explain why to anyone. I thought at the time it was because of my shameful lack of control over alcohol, which was part of it, but the shame of having to face those girls again, peers who didn’t seem to react to alcohol in such a bizarre way, was too much. Pam, my closest friend, didn’t speak to me for seven years.

A solicitous staff member wheeled me to the pay phone so I could get a ride to the emergency room for x-rays. I called two friends, but neither answered the phone, and my last resort on a busy Friday morning was to call my husband, who is setting trusses on his

job site twenty-five miles south. Here the memory dims, then brightens. Dim is the exact nature of our conversation; glaring was his impatient tone, and at the time I thought he was annoyed with me for causing so much trouble, and regretted our marriage. It would take me several months to realize that his anger was directed at my stubborn desire to carry on with activities like step aerobics when I was weak as a limp dishrag.

I sat in a wheelchair in the emergency room, full to capacity, thinking of Sheila's visit, when she tried to pretend nothing was wrong. She stood in front of a mirror talking to someone she didn't recognize before she ended up in a wheelchair, confused and dying. As I watched a seven-year-old boy with lustrous black hair who had sprained his wrist on the playground and a seventy-something year old couple, the wife coughing spastically in the claustrophobic room in which my wheelchair barely fit, I became Sheila. As my husband stood rigidly over me as I cried, I saw her clearly—abandoned, dismissed, and alone, in her unwed mother's home holding cell. In her wheelchair at a hospital admitting room in Florida, away from her cats in Oregon.

The salty flow of tears, long overdue, plastered my tee-shirt to the rounded bump of the port protruding below my collar bone. I detested being vulnerable, and the feeling of humiliation was something I hadn't felt since I stopped drinking and started asking for help.

When I graduated high school, I worked full time in the hospital admissions office, where I met David, a 17-year-old drug addict and high school dropout. I married him. I liked his diamond earring, his rebellious spirit, and the intrigue that surrounded his

move from Pecos, Texas. He was estranged from his Caucasian father, who had long ago left his Mexican mother. His green eyes, Tex-Mex slang, and the mysterious white streak that ran through his dark brown hair also fascinated me, lending some excitement to my solitary existence after my friends went on to college. We divorced six months later, the alcohol and drug-influenced violence escalating to the point that someone was going to get killed, most likely me. And I continued to drink. To forget. To celebrate. To drown my sorrows. Whatever. Any excuse would do.

Of course, I didn't realize that I had an allergy, or intolerance to, alcohol. My family and I thought it was a moral and spiritual malady, and with enough will and determination I could stop drinking. With this in mind, a few months before I married David, I called the only Lutheran minister practicing in our small town. I was baptized Lutheran, a nod to my father's German heritage, but as far as I knew neither his parents, nor mine, ever went to the church. The young minister invited me to come to his house and talk. We did, and he encouraged me to cut down. "Just have one," he said. I looked at him like he was crazy, as he padded over to his refrigerator and grabbed a couple of beers.

I declined the beer, and after some perfunctory sermon about how God wishes for us to eat, smoke, and drink in moderation, he asked me out to dinner Friday night. This I also declined, leaving his house disgusted and discouraged.

I had turned to fiction during my chemotherapy treatments. I picked up *Violin*, the only Anne Rice novel I'd read. I had read that her tales about blood-sucking entities

reflected her obsession with “bad blood.” Her daughter died from a blood disorder, leukemia. I wondered about my blood relatives, if the cancer gene was passed to me from Nancy, or Sonny. Or if the cancer was caused by environmental factors, like being too close to microwave ovens, or from drinking. I’m not sure what I believed, but it seemed that the past kept shadowing me.

In November, a storm lashed against the house, sounding more violent than the last hurricane that moved through. I had transformed into a night person, roaming around the dark house, listening for frogs that nightly invaded the pool. I opened the garage door to watch the lightning zag across the sky. I used to get up in annoyance or panic when my sleep was disrupted, but during my treatments, I was resigned to the fact that darkened rooms and the quiet house hid my discomfort and my appearance. While I refused to wear the wig when I was home, I would sometimes wear a brightly-colored bandana in my husband’s presence, and I also wore either the bandana or wig when Ashley, then eight, came to visit during the week and every other weekend.

During my next treatment, the Chemo Room was full to limit. I waited for a patient to leave so I could settle into his vacated recliner, and grabbed a brightly colored afghan, waiting to start my chemotherapy. One of the young nurses started my pre-chemo drug regimen, awaiting my blood work results before administering Taxol. On busy days, there were delays with the blood work in the neighboring lab room. Before each treatment, my white blood count, hemoglobin, and platelets were tested to make sure they weren’t too low to continue treatment. I was impatient, staring, feeling queasy from either

the sick smell of the room or the dreaded Decadron I took the day before chemo.

Everything was on rollers, a portable drug-dispensing sick room. I watched a pudgy, pale young man who was occupying one of the rollaway beds across the room. He was a source of interest to me because he looked to be in his early forties, younger than everyone except me. He wore a white surgical mask, and I wondered if this was to protect him from our germs or us from his germs. He might have contracted our regional flu outbreak, which can prove deadly to a chemo patient.

He abruptly sat up. He walked to the bathroom. Behind the closed door he retched for two or three minutes. This was a long time when you are idly sitting, listening. Retch. Flush. Retch. Flush. Nervous laughter around the room. Others with deadpan expressions. I was reminded of Sheila the first night I met her, when she was vomiting after her flight from Oregon. I had wondered if she was drunk, but there had been no alcohol on her breath. Later, when she was hospitalized just down the street from where I was receiving my chemotherapy treatments, I'd realize it was the build-up of toxins in her liver.

Colleen, one of the vivacious nurses with long, fiery-red tresses, finally heard the vomiting and looked around in bewilderment. "Is that...?" She looks at us sitting with our ports and IVs and ashen faces and we nod to finish her sentence, *yes, that is someone throwing up*. "Who?" She looked around again. Several of us, eager to be of service and stop the retching sounds, pointed to the empty, blanket-rumpled bed. *The gentleman with the mask*, several of us murmured in unison. As if on cue, he came out of the restroom, looking pale but stable, his mask askew. I held my breath when he walked by, realizing I'd done so only when I exhaled.

I resumed my ceiling gazing. The shiny silver IV holders were lined up in a row, hanging from the ceiling like a child's mobile, only they didn't twirl. Sometimes they swayed quietly, the light catching the slick roundness of the metal or foil. On holidays they were always decorated—October brought sparkly paper pumpkins and smiling black cats, November there were gobble-gobblers and pilgrims; December featured tinsel and red and green ornaments (plastic, not glass, the administration wouldn't want a patient to get cut). January had silver glitter-coated stars catching sparks of the fluorescent lights. February would bring some pretty impressive red hearts.

I sobbed in frustration. I wept because I wished to, because the absence of optimism nettled me, along with my memories of Sheila, of drinking, of seeing stars.

The sun was blazing when I opened my eyes. I couldn't hear any birds chirping—just an occasional cricket buzzing in the long grass along the side of the dirt road. I'm lying face down in hard packed sand, and I can feel the granules digging into my cheek. Since I was thrown through the front windshield of Doug's Acura, which I had been driving, I must have been catapulted face first from the car; it wasn't in my line of vision. Doug, my boss, was, though, and he was lying a few feet from me.

For a few seconds I thought he was dead. Doug was also lying on his stomach, face sideways, and his glasses lay cracked another foot or so from his body. As I started to crawl over to him, he opened his eyes. He rose to his knees, brushing off the sandy road dirt and finding his glasses, putting the wire frames behind his ears even though the

lenses were cracked. I watched, marveling that he acted like he taken a mild spill off a bicycle, no big deal, get up, move on. With me driving his car.

Are you okay? He asked, and his head is bleeding, the blood bright against his thin blond hair.

Yeah. I craned my head to look into his face, but he'd already turned away, wading through the wheat field, looking at the ground.

I rubbed my forehead, feeling sticky stuff that has seeped down from a cut, and what is now a huge egg-scooped type bump to the right of my hair part. I smelled sour, the dried blood curling in and out of strands of hair like snakes. Later, my skull would cave in on itself like an inverted egg, leaving a permanent indentation from the concussion.

But for then, I didn't care. I can't believe we woke up the same time, I said, rolling over onto my back and see the gold-toned Acura lying upside down in the middle of the dirt road, the empty beer bottles and cans also scattered around the car and in the wheat field. The rising sun threw shadows our way, indicating that it is probably seven or so in the morning, and the dirt road where the car rolled led north and south. North of town? Why were we north of town, when the neighboring town meeting we had attended was thirty miles south and east?

We could only speculate about where we were. Country back roads were only good for hunting, shooting fireworks, and necking in parked cars, not drinking, driving, and rolling cars.

I dipped my fingers into the ceramic smooth concave on my bald head during my eighth and final chemotherapy treatment, watching a thin, wrinkled man with spindly legs and reddish black bruised eyes. He was lying on one of the rollaway beds in the Chemo Room. His wrecked face was no surprise to most of us; we knew the effects of the chemo drugs lingered for days after we left that room, as well as the pretreatment corticosteroids that cause physical clumsiness and a stupor-like state of mind.

I strained to hear the conversation he was having with his pretty, silver-haired wife, who was standing over his bed. “Concrete doesn’t give,” she said. He joked and laughed, cracking inappropriate jokes as Dr. McClure strolled in to see him, ignoring the rest of us in our recliners.

“You got quite a shiner, there,” Dr. McClure said.

“I tripped, Doc,” the man said, gleefully clapping his hands.

“You need platelets.”

I envisioned the patient dancing around his living room, banging into a coffee table, after taking the Decadron. I remembered when my father was taking chemotherapy for bladder cancer; my father, who clumsily bumped into a coffee table and developed a leg clot that almost killed him.

Collette finally started my IV, then I shivered with the iciness in my veins that Taxol brings. I heard a man, who was wearing a green beret over his bald head, say, *No big deal. I’ve been cold before.* I scanned the left side of the recliner lined wall, seeing familiar elderly faces, making brief eye contact. I saw the conflicting emotions of envy and gladness flicker among the lined, half-dead faces of those I told, *this is the last one.*

DIRECTED READINGS

Theory and Practice

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|--------------------------|--|
| Roland Barthes | <i>Mythologies; Image-Music-Text</i> |
| Jocelyn Bartkevicius | “‘The Person to Whom Things Happened’:
Meditation on the Tradition of Memoir” |
| Charles Baxter, Ed. | <i>The Business of Memory</i> |
| Madison Smartt Bell | <i>Narrative Design: Working with Imagination, Craft and
Form.</i> |
| James Berlin | <i>Rhetoric and Reality</i> |
| Wendy Bishop | “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-Ends
Composition” |
| Harold Bloom | <i>The Anxiety of Influence</i> |
| Michel Foucault | <i>Power/Knowledge</i> |
| Lee Gutkind, Ed. | “Introduction: A Search for Sanity” to <i>Surviving Crisis</i>
From Fourth Genre 2.1: Forum on Nonfiction: “Why I
Chose the Creative Nonfiction Way of Life” |
| Halpern and Frank, Eds. | Introductory: <i>The Nature Reader:</i> |
| John Hay | “The Nature Writer’s Dilemma” |
| Seamus Heaney | “Death of a Naturalist” |
| Patricia Hampl | <i>I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory</i> |
| Judith Harris | “Re-Writing the Subject: Psychoanalytic Approaches to
Creative Writing and Composition Pedagogy” |
| Douglas Hesse | “The Place of Creative Nonfiction” |
| Stephen King | <i>On Writing</i> |
| Phillip Lopate | Introduction to <i>The Art of the Personal Essay</i> |
| Jane Piirto | <i>My Teaming Brain</i> |
| Root and Steinberg, Eds. | <i>The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative
Nonfiction 3rd Ed.:</i> |
| | “Introduction: Creative Nonfiction, the Fourth
Genre” |
| Jocelyn Bartkevicius | “The Landscape of Creative Nonfiction” |
| Mary Clearman Blew | “The Art of Memoir” |
| Annie Dillard | “To Fashion a Text” |
| Peter Ives | “The Whole Truth” |
| Phillip Lopate | “What Happened to the Personal Essay?” |
| Robert L. Root Jr. | “Beyond Linearity: Writing the Segmented Essay” |
| Michael Steinberg | “Finding the Inner Story in Memoirs and Personal Essays” |
| Marlene A. Schiwy | “Taking Things Personally: Women, Journal Writing and
Self-Creation” |

Lenore Terr, M.D.	<i>Unchained Memories</i>
Jane Tompkins	<i>Reader-Response Criticism</i>
Margaret K. Willard-Traub	“Rhetorics of Gender and Ethnicity in Scholarly Memoir: Notes on a Material Genre”

Anthologies

Stephen Jay Gould, Ed.	<i>The Best American Essays 2002</i>
Kitchen & Jones, Eds.	<i>In Brief</i>
Phillip Lopate, Ed.	<i>The Art of the Personal Essay</i>

Pre-1800

Anne Bradstreet	<i>Meditations Divine and Moral</i> and selected poetry
William Bradford	Excerpt from <i>Of Plymouth Plantation</i>
Jonathon Edwards	<i>Personal Narrative</i>
Benjamin Franklin	<i>Information to Those Who Would Remove America</i>
Thomas Jefferson	<i>The Autobiography</i>
Michel de Montaigne	“Of Books,” “Of a Monstrous Child,” “On Some Verses of Virgil,” “Of the Force of Imagination”
Mary Rowlandson	<i>A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration</i>
Sei Shonagon	“Hateful Things”
John Winthrop	Excerpt from <i>The Journal of John Winthrop</i>
Augustine	<i>Confessions</i>

Nineteenth Century (British and American)

Frederick Douglass	<i>Narrative of the Life of an American Slave</i>
Ralph Waldo Emerson	“Nature,” “Self-Reliance,” “The Over-Soul”
Charles Lamb	“New Year’s Eve,” “A Chapter on Ears,” “Dream Children: A Reverie”
Henry David Thoreau	“Civil Disobedience,” “Walking,” “To Emerson”
	<i>Walden</i>

Twentieth Century British and American (Pre-Contemporary)

James Baldwin	“Notes of a Native Son”
Max Beerbohm	“Going out for a Walk” and “Laughter”
Fyodor Dostoevsky	“Part 1: Underground” from <i>Notes from Underground</i>
George Orwell	“Such, Such Were the Joys”

E.B. White	“The Death of a Pig” “The Flocks We Watch by Night” “On a Florida Key” “Once More to the Lake” “A Week in April”
Virginia Woolf	<i>A Room of One’s Own</i> “Death of a Moth” “To the Lighthouse” “Street Haunting”

Contemporary Nonfiction

Edward Abbey	<i>Desert Solitaire</i>
Margaret Atwood	<i>Wilderness Tips</i>
Karen Brennan	<i>Being with Rachel</i>
Annie Dillard	<i>Pilgrim at Tinker Creek</i> <i>Teaching a Stone to Talk</i> “Living Like Weasels”
Joan Didion	“Goodbye to All That”
Andre Dubus	<i>Broken Vessels</i>
Dave Eggers	<i>A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius</i>
Janet Fitch	<i>White Oleander</i>
Lucy Grealy	<i>As Seen on TV</i> <i>Autobiography of a Face</i>
Kathryn Harrison	<i>The Kiss</i>
Edward Hoagland	“The Courage of Turtles”
Mary Karr	<i>The Liars’ Club</i> <i>Cherry</i>
Caroline Knapp	<i>Drinking: A Love Story</i>
Phillip Lopate	<i>Against Joie de Vivre</i>
Peter Mattheissen	“The Cranes of Hokkaido” “In the Spirit of Crazyhorse” “Foot Safari”
Frank McCourt	<i>Angela’s Ashes</i>
Jay Neugeboren	<i>Imagining Robert</i>
Michael Ondaatje	<i>Running in the Family</i>
Ann Patchett	<i>Truth and Beauty</i>
Adrienne Rich	“Split at the Root”
Rainer Maria Rilke	<i>Letters to a Young Poet</i>
Scott Russell Sanders	“Under the Influence” and “Cloud Crossing”
Alice Sebold	<i>Lucky</i>
Richard Selzer	“The Knife”
Alison Smith	<i>Name All the Animals</i>

Root and Steinberg, Eds.	<i>The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction:</i>
Mary Clearman Blew	“The Unwanted Child”
Judith Cofer	“Silent Dancing”
Philip Lopate	“Portrait of my Body”
Michelle Cliff	“History as Fiction, Fiction as History”
Terry Tempest Williams	<i>Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place</i> <i>Desert Quartet</i> “To Be Taken”
Koren Zailckas	<i>Story of a Drunken Girlhood</i>
Rebecca Walker	<i>Black, White and Jewish: An Autobiography of a Shifting Self</i>
Elizabeth Wurtzel	<i>Prozac Nation</i>

Contemporary Fiction and Poetry

Dorothy Allison	<i>Bastard out of Carolina</i>
Margaret Atwood	<i>Alias Grace</i> <i>Morning in the Burned House</i>
Sevim Burak	“The Window”
Edwidge Danticat	<i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i>
T.S. Eliot	“The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock” “Ash Wednesday”
Alice Munro	Vintage Munro
Sharon Olds	<i>Satan Says</i>
Sylvia Plath	<i>Ariel</i> <i>The Bell Jar</i>
Stan Rice	<i>Singing Yet</i>
Richard Russo	<i>Empire Falls</i>
Walter Mosey, Ed.	<i>2003 Best American Short Stories</i>

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