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BIRTH OF A MOTHER

by

ASHLEY RAE CURRAN

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term

2011

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For Aiden, my inspiration,

And for Niki and Jonathan, without whom I may never have finished.

ABSTRACT

Birth of a Mother is a memoir that tells the story of how my unplanned pregnancy helps me to transform from a damaged adolescent into an empowered mother. Using a first person, present tense narrative, I relive the nine months leading up to the unmedicated home birth of my first child, exploring the conflicts I faced over my obesity, over having no job and no place to call home, and over developing a relationship with a man who was not the baby's father.

Weaving in past tense vignettes, I attempt to show how I prepared myself for impending motherhood by reflecting on my mother's short, violent life and the abuse I suffered at her hands; the effect of losing my mother at the age of twelve and my quest to find someone to fill her role throughout my adolescence; my experiences with faith, from Christianity, to Buddhism, to Atheism, to Paganism; and by struggling to heal the emotional scars left over from suffering childhood abuse, and multiple rapes as a teenager.

As I uncover parallels between my mother's life and my own, I come to a new understanding of the mental illness that seems prevalent in my family, of the causes and triggers of my personal flaws, and of methods that I can use to become for my child the mother I always wanted for myself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Russell Kesler for telling me I should consider a career in writing memoir in my very first creative writing class as an undergraduate anthropology major in 2002.

Thank you Patrick Rushin for teaching me about scriptwriting and dialogue; the late, great Jeanne Leiby for being an incredible influence on my writing and revising processes while trying to teach me to write fiction; and Terry Thaxton for teaching me more about poetry than I ever learned anywhere else and for introducing me to the brilliance of Mary Oliver and Billy Collins.

Thanks especially to Jocelyn Bartkevicius for putting up with my excuses for the better part of eight years, teaching me about the arts of creative nonfiction, and helping me turn the piles of roughage I submitted to her into something of which I can feel proud.

Thank you, Dolphin and Alpheus, for always supporting me and being there for me, no matter how unpredictable or self-destructive I behaved.

Biggest thank you of all to Aiden, for choosing me to be your mother, and for every bit of love, joy, and inspiration that you give me every moment of every day.

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INTRODUCTION: THE WRITING LIFE

I can't remember a time before I wanted to be a writer, nor can I remember ever not being able to read, or turning to books for solace, entertainment, and illumination about the world in which I found myself.

In elementary school, I read constantly, every book I could get my hands on, every book in our small library, from *The Chronicles of Narnia* to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, to *Nancy Drew*. I was eight when I found a copy of the first three books of the Earth's Children saga by Jean M. Auel at a yard sale, still shrink-wrapped in a paperback set. I read those books cover to cover over and over again as a child, and annually as an adult. Actually, I started reading the first book of the series again this morning.

In the Earth's Children series, I found a strong female character to emulate, a spirituality that made sense to me, an ideal of human behavior that the other humans in my life did not live up to, and an education about the natural world, emotion, sexuality, survival, and inner strength that helped me get through my abusive and neglectful childhood without becoming abusive or neglectful myself. The books meant so much to me and played such a powerful role in the formation of my personality and values, they made me want to share my story with the world, in hopes that it could touch others who suffered as I had, and help them survive and overcome.

I wrote Jean M. Auel when I was twelve, without telling her how young I was, and told her that I wanted to be a writer and asked her for advice. She wrote me back personally, a handwritten letter I still cherish nearly two decades later, encouraging me to educate myself, and above all to just WRITE. Unfortunately, I was so sensitive to criticism, I rarely wrote anything that wasn't assigned, and never really finished anything longer than a poem. I was so intent on

writing perfectly, I couldn't finish anything. I cut myself off halfway through, or never got past the planning stages.

In sixth grade, I decided that I wanted to write a brilliant, profound series of fantasy young adult novels from the perspective of two young girls, one Irish-American, the other Native American, who shared the same soul and embodied the creative force of a magical alternative world called Zaiga. I sketched my characters, named them, decided on their personality traits according to their zodiac sign, outlined what I wanted to happen in each book, and never wrote more than the first couple paragraphs. I wanted to just sit down and write straight through and have these incredible works of literature that would immediately find a world wide audience and skyrocket me to fame and wealth. And most important, I would be inundated with praise and made to feel special for having such a gift and starting so young.

But when I sat down to write, I couldn't make the glorious scenes from my head come to life on paper. I had no voice, no confidence, and no concept of time management or of how to break huge overwhelming goals into smaller, obtainable ones.

In seventh grade, I entered a writing contest in my school, and wrote an essay about my mother's death. I came in second place, with lots of praise and sympathy from my teachers. My best friend came in first with a poem he wrote about riding a roller coaster. With a few lines full of sensory details, he showed the physical and emotional ride, whereas I had simply told my sob story. So I tried to write poetry, and express my emotions in a few sentences and images. I forced rhyme and used tons of clichés, but my peers thought my work was brilliant, and my best friend's father helped us publish a book of our poetry, which we called *Poetry to Devour*, after the poetry unit in our English class.

It didn't sell.

Well, *we* bought a copy, when we were in our twenties. We brought it to the apartment we were sharing, shared a box of frozen fudge bars, and read it aloud to each other, laughing until tears streamed down our faces at how seriously we took ourselves as teenagers, and at how melodramatic our poetic voices had been.

In college, I started blogging, first on Opendiary, then on Livejournal, then on MySpace. Now I have four blogs on four totally different sites for four totally different purposes – a fitness blog on Wordpress where I chronicle my fitness plans and results, and talk about what veganism is doing for me; a parenting blog where I talk about my experiences, goals, and successes as a mother; a business blog, where I promote my tarot readings, spiritual crafts, and talk about events I attend and workshops I teach; and a free-writing blog that I do not promote, where I can write without concern for audience, structure, or rules.

I have written thousands of pages of drivel in the last ten years. Up until I had my son, I mostly wrote rants about the drama in my life or in the world. Sometimes I wrote about my hopes and dreams, often I wrote about how much I longed to be a mother. Even more often, I wrote about my traumatic childhood, trying to come to terms with it, and understand why I suffered, and why I was still suffering. I wrote about struggling with depression, and wondered why no one seemed to understand just how hard it was to get out of bed, to clean, to take care of myself, or why it was so easy to lose myself in helping others. I wrote to random strangers who talked about their feelings of hopelessness online, encouraging them to never give up, assuring them that true happiness really did exist, and that it was attainable for anyone with enough determination.

I wrote more poems, trying to express my feelings to myself, and failing miserably. I tried writing songs, that I would sing to myself on particularly miserable days, but would have died rather than share them with anyone else, so trite and inadequate were those lyrics.

In the third year of my undergraduate degree, I took Intro to Creative Writing as an elective. In that class we wrote a short story, a poem, and a memoir. My short story failed because I tried to tell a true story about methodically cutting my arm after an emotional breakdown that had occurred during that same semester, and my classmates picked it apart and called it unbelievable. My poem was okay, though none of my classmates, myself included, really knew much about what made a poem good.

But in memoir I finally found a medium in which I could tell my story in a poetic way. Poetic, to me, meant something along the lines of “deep,” and “evocative.” I told the story of saying no to a sexual proposition for the first time, layering that story with a trip to the beach with my sister. I didn't edit myself as I wrote, I just let the words ebb and flow, and the result was the highest praise I've ever received on any written assignment. My professor had no suggestions for improvement, and told me I should consider memoir-writing for my career. I still have that paper. I think I'm going to frame it.

I decided to minor in creative writing, and took as many writing workshops as I could. My entire last semester as an undergraduate was creative writing workshops, and as graduation approached, my professors told me they were starting a master's program in creative writing. I enrolled, a nervous wreck after submitting my portfolio, and ecstatic upon my acceptance.

Over the next three years, I learned more about the art and craft of writing than I had in the two decades previous.

In fiction workshops, I learned what it meant for a story to be true to itself, how manipulating structure changed the entire emotional impact, and how to develop character and dialogue. After those workshops, I found myself constantly critiquing the novels I read, thinking about how I would have changed the wording or structure to make the story stronger.

In poetry workshops, I learned the power of words, layers of meaning, context, how to express emotion through the five senses, how the shape of a sentence and punctuation affected the connotation. I found myself in awe of Mary Oliver and Billy Collins; Oliver for the beauty and power she found in the natural world, Collins for his humor and accessibility.

In nonfiction workshops, I learned how to take the lessons from the other two genres and apply them to telling the stories of my life. Or rather, I learned how to recognize stories and powerful moments from my life, create characters out of aspects of myself, and tell the truth of a scene from the perspective of my memories and the effects my memories have had on my development as a person, rather than as a dispassionate report of events I witnessed. I was inspired by Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*, how she used the poetic tool of a refrain to link vignettes and short memoirs of her life into a book-length narrative.

It has taken me eight years to finish my thesis. Eight long, drama-filled, traumatic, crazy, chaotic years. In the first five or six years, my thesis did not even have a name. I could never get past the first few chapters. Whenever I got to what I considered the middle of the project, I would lose all momentum, completely restructure the entire work, and start all over. I am afraid to ask my thesis advisor how many different versions of chapter one I sent her over the years.

Every single semester, I would go through the same cycle of determination to graduate, followed by depression-fueled procrastination, followed by anxiety-fueled drama, and ending the semester by becoming physically ill and going through yet another episode of personal hell. The first semester ended with the end of my first long-term relationship. The following semester ended with my epic failure to lead my dying fraternity. The next semester ended with my leaving both the fraternity and the Pagan group I co-founded. Another semester ended with my short-lived marriage, the next with my failed move to Wisconsin, yet another ended with unemployment and accidental pregnancy, the next with having to break the lease on my apartment, the next stalled by new motherhood and horrible postpartum depression, the next by a move to Cocoa Beach, the next by homelessness with my one year old. Spring 2011 I struggled to keep a roof over our heads, and now, finally, I have some stability and support in my life, found in the last place I ever would have thought to look.

This has been the only living arrangement I have ever experienced in which there is no drama, the first time in my life that I have lived with people who love, value, and appreciate me for who I am and what I can do, and who encourage me to better myself without making me feel like I don't measure up. This is the first time I've had roommates who help me with my son so I can write for eight to ten hours a week, and they are the reason I am finally graduating.

Becoming a mother was the first step in healing my mind, body, heart, and spirit, which was necessary for me to be able to finally finish my thesis, graduate, and move on to new projects. I hope my thesis succeeds in showing my journey from broken child to damaged youth to desperately-trying-to-heal adult, and finally into a woman with the promise of being whole and happy.

It's only now, in my son's third year of life, that I have finally been able to see the whole picture of that story. I couldn't finish writing it before because I couldn't see where it was going. I was so stuck in my pain and in the past, I was unable to see where I was headed; I just knew I wasn't there yet.

The writing life for me was a cycle of procrastination, stress, cramming, and slumping in defeat. But in the last few months, I've been blessed with an opportunity to write uninterrupted for hours at a time twice a week, and that has made all the difference. Tuesday and Thursday nights, I finish dinner, vegan, nutritious, delicious, and cooked by moi. Then I wait until my son is distracted, run to the car with my laptop clutched protectively to my chest, and take off for my chosen writing spot.

When the weather is lovely and the bugs are dormant, I go to a park with a picnic table overlooking a brackish runoff pond, rippling with wildlife. I greet the woodpeckers, cranes, ibises, crows, fish, and squirrels, open up my laptop, turn on my wordless music, open a few hundred files, cut and paste and type and delete and repeat until sunset. Then I head to Books A Million or Starbucks, where I sit in the cafe until my laptop dies, or they close, whichever comes first. Most writing evenings, I end up sitting in my car in front of my house for the last forty five minutes, working until my laptop batteries give out. Then I keep writing in my head for a few minutes, until my son distracts me with his adorable toddler ways, and the power of his cuteness compels me to play, or be a human jungle gym.

I read while my son climbs on me, cuddles with me, watches movies, plays at the park, and while I push him in the swing at the park. I read while waiting for red lights to turn green. I read books on culinary technique, nutrition, parenting, paganism, sustainable living, and on

writing when I'm in a productive mood. I read paranormal and highlander romances, or re-read my favorite series, like the *House of Night* series by P. C. Cast, the *Earth's Children* series by Jean M. Auel, the *Harry Potter* books by J. K. Rowling, or the *Anne of Green Gables* series by Lucy Maud Montgomery, when I'm feeling stressed out and need to escape.

I always have a notebook on hand, to scribble notes about ideas for my thesis and other writing projects, including my four blogs, and when internet is available, I spend way too much time on Facebook. I joined a couple of writing groups on Facebook, which helps me make and keep writing goals.

Amusingly, I missed my first writing goal for this semester because true to past patterns, I got sick to my stomach, had a couple of ulcer attacks even though my ulcer had been dormant for two years and my diet is much healthier now than it has ever been before, and I snapped off the head of the power cord to my laptop, without saving my last few chapters to a jump drive, making it impossible to finish the chapters. Thankfully, I managed to get back on track within a week.

Finally, I have actually completed a long term writing goal. Now I can happily devote myself to at least one of the three books which have been waiting impatiently for me, perhaps the spiritual memoir, possibly the Pagan pregnancy, or maybe the metaphysical self-healing guide.

PROLOGUE

I can't remember my mother's speaking voice. I can see her beside me, when I was eleven, walking across the full parking lot towards the entrance of Wal-Mart, past abandoned shopping carts in the muted light of a cloudy morning. Her hair was dark auburn, cut short and unintentionally spiky. She was a few inches shorter than me, her skin pale and sickly, the gauntness of her features emphasizing the paralysis of the left half of her face, left eye wide open, left half of her mouth permanently frowning. She wore mauve blush to highlight her cheekbones, blue eye shadow so stylish in the eighties and early nineties, and Chap Stick on her pink lips. Her long-sleeved teal turtleneck was tucked neatly into her dark blue jeans, which she wore with flat dress shoes, leaving her almost half a foot shorter than me.

I remember trying to put my arm on her shoulder but letting it fall to my side when she told me it was too heavy. Then she apologized for being an embarrassment, looking the way she did. Confused and wracking my brain to think of any time I ever expressed disgust over her appearance, I assured her that she didn't embarrass me. I can see her uneven step, the way she stared at the ground as she spoke, eyes glittering, her mouth moving to make the words, but the memory is mute.

I can't remember her singing voice. I can hear the blended voices of the Buddhist choir we joined in Orlando when I was nine or ten. We met in a small, neat room with dark blue carpet and stark white walls, dozens of us standing in a semicircle around our conductor. I stood with my mother in the middle of the altos, sopranos to our right, and basses to our left. One day I purposely sang in a higher octave, as loudly as I could, hoping to impress her. "We'll be talking/ heart to heart/ we'll be walking/ side by side," I sang. She stopped the director during

practice. “Listen to her! She’s singing soprano!” I smiled so big and stood so tall when the director moved me to stand with the sopranos, Mom's eyes shining with love and pride at me between the few bodies that separated us.

The only sound from my mother that I can remember is her enraged scream. But I can’t remember the words. I see the hateful expression on her face, the crooked grimace, one eye wide and the other a thin slit, that one afternoon when I was ten, as I backed slowly out of the kitchen, my heart pounding, the knife glinting as its tip pricked my chest while hot tears spilled over my cheeks. I remember the insults she shrieked at me as I backed out of the kitchen, the dining room, the living room, out the front door, tripping over my bike, and breaking into sobs as I scrambled to my feet and ran.

Seventeen years later, fifteen years after my mother's death, I lie on an air mattress in my cluttered apartment, place my hand over my womb, and think about my mother, motherhood, and what kind of mother I’ll be.

As far back as I can remember I’ve dreamed of having my own children, of building forts with them out of cushions or mud, singing with them, reading to them, comforting their tears with kisses, as I often wished my own mother would have done for me. Popular thought says the older we get, the more we become our parents. I think, I could never hurt my own child...could I?

But what if my childhood left me so damaged that I can’t tell the difference between abuse and discipline?

What if I die young and my children grow up never knowing how much I already love them?

When the tiny being inside me turns twenty-seven, what will he remember?

My mother was only thirty-two when she died. My father was forty-one, and I have lived these past ten years of my young adulthood with a fatalistic irresponsibility. I haven't been able to imagine still being alive at fifty, much less plan for it.

My baby doesn't even have eyes or ears yet, but has already fundamentally changed my life. Because when I turn thirty two, he will be four. When I turn forty-one, my child will be thirteen. And if I don't live to be older than either of my parents, I don't want him to spend his life searching for bits and pieces of me to put together in a little box in his heart, fantasizing about what kind of person I was and wondering how I felt about him.

JUNE

My tongue is cold, my butt has gone numb, and I'm still staring at the two blue lines, alone in the cold master bathroom of my two bedroom apartment, my roommates presumably sleeping through the explosion of shock and terror that just went off in the core of my being.

On autopilot, I pull my pants over my 3X behind, flush the toilet, pull my dark blonde hair into a ponytail, and stumble through my dark apartment toward the sliding glass door that leads to the patio.

I grab my pack of cigarettes off the kitchen counter in passing, and take a single step towards the patio before I realize what I am about to do. I stare at the Marlboro Menthol 100s for a moment. Then I throw the entire pack into the trash can, grab my purse, and leave for work. Just like that, I become a non-smoker. From two packs a day to no way, just for my baby. I already love him more than I love myself.

I want to be excited, ecstatic, but I just feel frozen and numb. This is my last week of teaching, maybe ever. I was laid off, along with thousands of other teachers with more experience and better credentials and references than I have. Sitting at my desk during my lunch hour, I research everything I can about early pregnancy while I wait for my two best friends, Dolphin and Morrigan, to respond to my news. No matter how many times I look it up, I can't find a single example of a pee stick ever giving a false positive.

After ten years of not being careful, and dozens of negative tests, no matter how many early pregnancy symptoms I thought I had, after my crazy menstrual cycle that skips months at a

time, and twice now has been so heavy that I was sure I was hemorrhaging, I thought I was infertile.

I had resigned myself to the assumption that I would never have children of my own and would die an old maid in a tiny apartment full of furry and scaly pets, while harboring the fantasy that the love of my life would suddenly appear on my doorstep to whisk me away on a romantic tour of the world, after which we'd marry barefoot on a Caribbean beach beneath a full moon and make mad passionate love in a bungalow with the intention of starting a very large family.

I never expected to conceive under these conditions. Not only am I not married, but after tonight I might not even have a boyfriend.

It just figures that the only “friend with benefits” type of relationship I have ever had, with the man who has been telling me that I should find a real relationship with someone who wants a family, because he never will, is the one in which I conceived my first child. I'd already planned to call that man tonight to tell him that I can't see him anymore, because I officially started dating Ranger, an acquaintance from high school, two days ago.

I hadn't seen Ranger in over a decade when he found me on an online quiz and dating site, OkCupid. We met up for dinner as friends, but it quickly turned into flirtation, and launched into a two-day date, during which he drove me all the way from my home in Orlando to a Tampa mall just because it was the location of the only theater in all of Florida that was still playing a kung fu movie I'd been dying to see, *The Hidden Kingdom*.

Best of all, he has a fourteen-month-old daughter, Alexandria, with whom I immediately fell in love the first time I saw her zooming around the kitchen in her wheeled walker. In his

OkCupid profile, Ranger claims that he can't live without his daughter, which is the sexiest thing a man can say to a woman who wants children more than air, a woman who is rapidly approaching thirty and already once divorced. How ironic, that I was already pregnant when we reconnected.

And on that note, the final bell for the day has rung. I have discovered that my best friends are about as articulate as I am when stunned by unexpected pregnancy news. Dolphin replied almost immediately, with suggestions for government agencies to contact followed by virtual hugs. We sent emails back and forth all day, between and during my classes. I wasn't teaching so much today as hosting end of the year parties.

Morrigan, who is my self-proclaimed "soul-sister," and who inspired me to buy the pregnancy test earlier in the week with a "wouldn't it be funny if..." comment, finally responded just before I left the school. In the email, she offered me an, "I told you so," along with congratulations, and informed me that her boyfriend, Moocher, quit the job that he's had for a whole week because it was costing too much in gas money to make the commute.

This is my business because Morrigan and Moocher are my roommates, and neither of them has contributed a cent to the rent, Internet, or utilities in the few months they've lived with me. Frustration over their flakiness and irresponsibility flares and dies quickly. I have more important things to think about.

I'm going home for a few hours before I go to Ranger's to give him a reason to dump me before we've even been together a week. I don't know what the baby's father, Pan, is going to do or say. I don't know where I'm going to work. I don't know where I'm going to live. I don't

know what's going to happen. Therefore, I'm going to eat a carton of Rocky Road ice cream and, for about thirty seconds, life will be swell.

I don't know if I can call this a love triangle, but it is a disturbing parallel to a chapter of my mother's life. When she was twenty-three, she was married to an abusive man who was twice her age, and pregnant with my half-sister, her secret lover's baby.

I can't imagine what she must have felt while lying in bed with a man she hated, tied to him by marriage and me, her three-year-old firstborn, while pregnant with a child accidentally conceived in a love tryst with another man. Before she died, Mom told me that my father often beat and raped her. I wonder if my father raped my mother around the time my half-sister was conceived, and if that is why he believed himself to be her father; or if he knew that the baby wasn't his, but signed her birth certificate anyway, thinking that claiming both of her children would force his wife, our mother, to stay with him.

My mother had a job, a man who loved and wanted her, and a loving extended family to support her, but she had to escape a physically and emotionally abusive marriage. I have no job, a brand new relationship that probably will not survive my pregnancy, and a disconnected family that I can't depend on, but at least I'm not trapped in a loveless marriage, or being abused by anyone other than myself.

The humid night air, thick with the fragrance of the jasmine lining Ranger's driveway, fills my little four door sedan as I pull up with my windows down. He waits for me under the light on his front porch, my personal giant animated teddy bear, about six feet tall and three

hundred pounds, with shoulder length dark blond hair and wearing clothes a size or so too big.

The moment I step out of my car, Ranger asks, “What's wrong?”

I desperately want a hug, but I can't even look into his blue eyes as I answer his question with my own question, carefully formed and rehearsed earlier between bites of ice cream. “You know how you have a child from a previous relationship?”

“Yeah,” Ranger says, drawing out the word to make it both answer and question.

“Well, I do too, and we'll get to meet her in eight months,” I say, attempting a cheeky grin.

Ranger just looks at me for a minute.

“It's not yours!” I stumble over my words in my hurry to assure him that I'm not trying to dupe him or use him. “Two days isn't long enough to release enough hormones to test for pregnancy. I conceived on my birthday, you know, Mother's Day weekend, last month, and I haven't seen the guy since then.”

I pause, waiting for Ranger to denounce me as a whore and tell me to leave his presence. Or walk back into the house and slam the door in my face. He does neither. He just stares at me, wordlessly, while I fidget.

“I actually was going to call him tonight. Well, I need to call him tonight. I just had to tell you first, because these last few days with you have been so wonderful, and I-” I choke back a sob.

Finally, Ranger reacts, pulling me into his arms and rubbing my back while I fight tears. “Okay,” he says after a moment. “This doesn't affect our relationship. It's me and you, that's all that matters.”

I dismiss the urge to argue the point over whether my pregnancy and impending motherhood will affect our relationship, and instead lock onto his acceptance. “You're okay with this?” I ask, my voice an octave higher than normal.

“Yes,” he says with a nod. “I wish it were mine, but...”

I start sobbing then, relieved, scared, and overjoyed all at the same time.

After I pull myself back together, having mentally rehearsed the next big conversation I need to have, I gird my loins and call Pan, whom I've already begun to think of as “the sperm donor.”

His phone rings for so long, I prepare myself to leave a voicemail message. So when he answers at the last second, I barely let him finish saying “Hello” before my message spills out. “Hi. I've got a boyfriend so I can't see you anymore, and I'm pregnant, and it's yours. So, how are you?”

The silence goes on so long I check my cell phone twice to see if our call is still connected before he finally responds. “What?” he asks.

“I just found out this morning, and you are most definitely the father,” I say.

After another long pause, he says, “I don't even know how to take care of myself right now.”

Sudden, overwhelming rage burns away my nervousness and uncertainty, and I quietly tell him to take some time to think about all this, and call me when he has something worthwhile to say. My hand shakes as I end the call and slip my phone back into my pocket. I look over at Ranger, who took a step back during my conversation, and who now looks at me with wide eyes. “Mood swings?” he asks.

I laugh so hard it turns into a coughing fit.

The rest of the week is a long daze of end of the year parties, packing up what I can, and abandoning thousands of dollars worth of teaching supplies because I have no one to help me pack. Anyway, I have more pressing matters in my uterus.

Just to be absolutely certain that I really am pregnant, I have a blood test done, the result of which is, of course, positive.

I apply for Medicaid, and schedule my first prenatal appointment at a women's health center. The earliest available appointment is two weeks away, which won't be until July.

I spend these two weeks isolated in my room in my apartment, doing my best to wrap up my former life and plan for motherhood. I fail miserably. How do I know what bits of my past are important enough to keep, or what I'll need for my future?

Piles of books, boxes full of sorted stones I've collected over the years, tarot decks, and spirit boards sit on one side of my room. I am keeping all of my stones because I love them and I can't really sell them, though I've spent over a thousand dollars on them over the years. My tarot decks I divide into two piles: my thirty-three absolute favorites on the right, and nearly seventy that I never use to give away or sell. My spirit boards, which look like what would happen if a board game and an Ouija board had a baby, are coming with me. I have two of them, one Native American themed, the other Astrologically themed, and both have helped me develop my intuition and faith over the last few years, using them with Morrigan, but also with several college friends, to whom I taught tarot and other forms of divination in my undergraduate years.

On the other side of my room are boxes of pictures, every handwritten and typed letter I've ever received, all my notes from my college courses, little gifts from the care packages Morrigan used to send me, crafting supplies for beading, wood burning, a dozen blank journals, coloring pencils, paints, markers, stickers, and decorative papers for my printer. I can't bear to part with my mementos, even the cute, cheap gifts from Morrigan. The crafting supplies are coming with me too. I try to throw them away, but I just can't. I love office supplies. I'm such a weirdo.

On my double high queen size air mattress I've piled up all of my clothes, ranging from the size fourteens I hope to wear again someday to the twenty-eights that I wear now, casual to professional. On top of that pile, I place my blue teddy bear, Rosie, a gift my late paternal grandmother bought for me when I was six. When Grandma asked me why I wanted a blue bear, I told her that she was blue because she soaked up all my tears.

In the closet, I've already packed away my altar tools and decorations, including my first wand, of oak and clear quartz that my friends Hawthorn and Dirigo helped me to make; a cast iron cauldron the size of my head with a triple moon symbol molded into its belly, which Morrigan had given to me years before; the Wiccan God and Goddess candle holders I'd bought to decorate the altar at my wedding, which depicted the Goddess in her three forms as Maiden, Mother, and Crone on one stick, and the God as Holly King and Oak King on the other; a wooden pentacle I'd burned myself; and my seven singing bowls, bell bowls like the one my parents used to have, except that theirs was black metal, and mine were white and composed of ground quartz crystals. They are called singing bowls because rubbing them produces a sustained note, and I have seven because each is a different note, each note corresponding to a

different energy center of the body, or chakra. I collected them one by one over the course of four years, hoping to someday travel with them to perform healing ceremonies and meditation concerts.

I throw away all the old bills for apartments, cell phones and cars that I no longer rent, manuals to appliances I no longer own, report cards from my high school years, and marked up manuscripts from my writing workshop classes, wincing at the amount of paper I'm adding to the landfill. I'm leaving my toaster oven, blender, vacuum cleaner, and other appliances for Morrigan and Moocher to use, as I have no need for them at Ranger's house, where I intend to spend most of my time. My jewelry, five favorite outfits, deodorant, comb, organic shampoo and conditioner, and toothbrush go into my old backpack, now a makeshift suitcase. I throw in a couple of notebooks with which to make lists and journal entries; paranormal romances about funny, sexy Highlanders and vampires to read when I feel too overwhelmed to be productive; and my planner, which I really will use this time, no really, my days of procrastination are over...and call it a night.

The last day of June finds me back at Ranger's house, which feels much more like home than my apartment, where I've spent the last two weeks. Technically, the house belongs to Ranger's mother, Cordelia, as Cordelia allowed him to move in with her so she could help look after her granddaughter after his ex took off. Now Ranger works from home while Cordelia watches Alexandria during the day, and at night Ranger gets her to bed while Cordelia quilts, reads, and catches up on her TV shows. On the nights that I'm over, which is just about every night, I watch "American Idol" or "So You Think You Can Dance" with her.

Alexandria crawls into my lap as I sit in the floor in her playroom, the former parlor. Providing a playroom for her was my idea, put into effect a month ago. When I first met Alexandria, there was no place in the house where she could freely crawl or climb without endangering herself. Cordelia's life seemed to consist of chasing her granddaughter around the house.

Now, Alexandria has a room with a couch and two chairs on which to pull herself to standing, a toy bin, a little TV that's always playing toddler shows, and a huge window to let in the sun and show her the outside world. I'm sitting in the floor with my back resting against the couch to encourage Alexandria to play with me, since she can't climb up yet. She's brought her favorite book to me, *Mr. Brown Can Moo*.

Cordelia sits in a chair across from us and smiles at me. "We really missed you these last couple of weeks," she says, and I look away for a moment so she won't see the tears in my eyes. Her welcome means the world to me, but I don't know how to tell her that, so I smile and say, "I missed y'all too." I cuddle Alexandria to me, and read aloud.

These moments of feeling like part of a family are a slice of heaven for me. My own family, my step-dad, half-sister, and half-brother, have their own lives. Though we all live in different houses in the same city, we're lucky to all get together once a year, if that. My friends, since graduating college and starting their professional lives, might as well live on the other side of the planet. We socialize primarily through email, sometimes with phone calls, rarely in person. Morrigan was like a sister to me until she moved in and decided I should be happy to pay all her bills. Now she's a hostile stranger I'd rather avoid.

I have felt so alone for so long. But now there is a tiny life growing inside of me, a precious spark that will someday be a person who is pretty much guaranteed to love me, at least until puberty.

Unless I miscarry.

I can't even think about that.

I wish I could call my mom. I wish I had a mother in the flesh, a maternal figure I could go to for comfort, advice, and support. I would love for Cordelia to become that person for me, but I don't know if I have the courage to open my heart to her, or if she's capable of being a mentor for a person like me, who has suffered in ways I doubt she can even imagine.

My mom died when I was twelve, and I'm both sorry and relieved that my baby will never get to meet her. Towards the end of my mother's short, tragic life, she became violently and emotionally abusive. But I don't blame her anymore. Before she died, I thought there was no excuse for hurting a child, and that I would never forgive her for the hurts she inflicted upon me. But now I know what her life was like, having pieced it together as a young adult after years of gleaning details from her mother and siblings. Now I believe that my mother's abusive behavior was a symptom of her own festering childhood wounds, which never had a chance to heal.

My mother and all seven of her siblings grew up bullied and beaten by their father, who raised cattle for beef in rural Maryland, and showed his children even less compassion than he showed his cattle. Having suffered brain damage from polio as a child, he seemed to have only two emotions: apathy and rage.

In accordance with the teachings of his small rural church, Mom's father believed that women must always wear skirts, never cut their hair, and unquestioningly obey their fathers or husbands. Men of his church should always wear pants, keep their hair short, and control their wives and children with as much force as necessary.

At sixteen, Mom tried to run away. Her father found her on the road a few miles away, wearing pants. He brought her home, stripped a switch, and whipped her bare backside and thighs until his arm grew tired and blood ran down her legs – not because she ran away, but because she wasn't wearing a skirt.

Two years later, Mom's mother, Meemaw, finally had enough. She divorced him and moved back to Virginia to be near her own mother. Mom moved in with Meemaw as soon as she graduated from high school.

Meemaw didn't remarry for about ten years. Her second husband, whom his new grandchildren called Peepaw, was a total sweetheart. He was half Cherokee, and had copper skin, dark eyes and salt and pepper hair, matching Meemaw in short stature and extra padding around the middle. Peepaw enjoyed sitting in his recliner, smoking cigars, and telling painfully lame jokes, like the one about the running refrigerator that we'd better go catch. Because it's running. Ha ha.

Peepaw was a hunter, and it was he who contributed the three buck heads decorating Meemaw's living room wall. Whenever Meemaw disagreed with something he said, Peepaw was quick to change his mind to match hers, with a wink and a smile, and then they'd hug and kiss like any couple passionately in love, him patting her jean-clad behind. Mom sang “You Light up My Life” at their wedding, a song that still perfectly reflects their relationship.

I wish at least one of my fathers had been more like Peepaw, approachable, paternal, and comforting; someone I could talk to who would let me know that I was loved and supported and that everything will be just fine.

My mother's first husband, my biological father, Roger, had a violent temper, though he didn't live long enough to take it out on me. He died when I was five, and I have minimal contact with his surviving relatives, but from them, I've gathered a few details about what he was like. For one thing, Roger loved Elvis, styling his hair after the rock star, and collected all his records on vinyl as well as eight track formats. Roger grew up a middle child among nine siblings. His father died when he was a teenager, and all I know about my paternal grandfather is that his name was Grady, and he had an affair with his oldest daughter when she was sixteen, which screams "severe mental illness and abusive personality" to me.

Roger grew up in a rural town in Virginia, where fishing, hunting, and intoxication were the primary sources of entertainment, and education, psychological counseling, and parenting courses were probably not readily available. He was a few inches taller than my mother, in his late thirties, heavysset, with the muscles of a former coal miner beneath the beer belly, when he met my young, petite, slender mother. When they married, months after Mom's nineteenth birthday, Roger had an eighteen-year-old daughter that my mother didn't know about, whom he'd attempted to rape two years prior. He was acquitted of the attempted rape, but her mother divorced him and took custody of his daughter and younger teenage son, and after that they were shunned by his side of the family. I didn't even know I had an older sister and brother until I was fifteen, ten years after my father's death and three years after my mother's death.

In my earliest memory, Roger and several other men sit on the couches and chairs around me, talking and drinking. I toddle to an end table and grab Roger's Budweiser with both hands. They all fall silent, watching, as I take a sip. Then they roar with laughter at the expression on my face, as I drop the half-full can and burst into tears, as much from embarrassment as from the nasty taste in my mouth.

My only other memory of Roger occurred when I was three, shortly before he went to jail, something he did with me that also left a bad taste in my mouth. Though I was only three, I vividly remember being hot and mostly blind in the darkness beneath the covers, in bed with Roger, his whispered encouragements, asking me to take him in my mouth, telling me how good it felt, thanking me for being his precious angel. I would not have known it was wrong if he hadn't kept making me promise not to tell my mother.

I kept that promise for nine years, but a month before Mom died, the day I had my first period, I told her. She cried, telling me over and over how sorry she was, and I wished I had kept that particular secret to myself. I felt as if Roger used me to hurt her once more. Even years after dying, he could hurt her.

In moments of confidence in the last year of her life, Mom told me that Roger raped and beat her, isolating her from her family and friends, always demanding to know where she was and who she was with. When she finally worked up the courage to leave him, he tried to kill her, an attempt that resulted in the permanent paralysis of the left half of her body. Worse, with a life-saving blood transfusion, the hospital accidentally infected my mother with HIV, an incurable, and at the time, untreatable disease that killed her slowly over the course of nine years.

Roger died in jail less than two years after trying to kill her, leaving Mom free to marry Allen. Allen was not as gentle and good-natured as Peepaw, but he was a vast improvement over Roger in the way he loved and treated Mom.

Allen was always stressed, working day and night, smoking cigarettes and drinking hard liquor every night before bed. Sometimes my sister, brother, and I would overhear him and Mom screaming at each other, though Allen was never physically violent with her. He did like to laugh and joke, but his jokes usually mocked other people, or were filled with innuendo, and though he kissed, caressed, and held Mom, he was awkward with us kids.

One year, shortly after Allen joined our family, my elementary school had a parent-child field day. Allen came to school with me, to be my Dad. He'd adopted me soon after marrying my mother, changing my last name to his, and although I would forever afterwards call him Dad, we were still getting to know each other.

One of the field events called for each father to carry his son or daughter on his back and race down the field. Dad grunted a bit as he hefted me onto his back and took his place along the starting line. Then the whistle sounded, and we were quickly left in the dust as the fathers with longer legs and skinny children took the lead.

In that moment, clinging to Allen's neck as he held my legs and ran, feeling the heat of the sun on my head and back and Allen's pulse through my choke hold, smelling sweat and Old Spice and grass and dirt, bouncing to the rhythm of Allen's feet as they pounded the ground, the shouts and laughter of the watching crowd almost drowned out by Allen's heavy breathing, I really felt connected to him. We were more than just two people living in the same house. We were family. He was Dad.

He was a very young dad, supporting a dying wife and three growing children with the skills he'd learned in the air force. He worked at Sprint, managing information systems, and he worked all the time. When the Internet became available to the average consumer, he used it to work from home – after a long day in the office. He spent so much time working, we really only saw him briefly during dinner and on weekend excursions to the beach, theme parks, or other local attractions, and during our biannual visits to his family in South Carolina and Mom's family in Virginia.

Fifteen years after Mom's death, he still works a lot, but he has a new wife now, one who never wanted children, and since he got involved with her, I have seen very little of him. Ever since I moved out of his house and into my own apartment when I was nineteen, the distance between us has grown greater every year. Now, I'm lucky to get a phone call from him once a year, usually on my birthday. He goes on cruises with his new wife every Christmas, and alternates spends Thanksgiving with her family and with his mother, sisters, and brothers in South Carolina. My siblings and I still get together on the holidays, so at least I have that little bit of family to give my child some day.

My baby's father, Pan, does not resemble a family man in any shape or form. Though he is seventeen years my senior and Roger was eighteen years older than my mother, there is no other comparison I can make between the two. Growing up, I always heard how much Roger loved his girls, Rose and me; how we were the center of his universe until the day he died. Roger was jealous and possessive of Mom, always demanding to know where she was, keeping her isolated from her family and friends. Pan, it seems, couldn't care less about his impending

fatherhood, nor about me. Pan is like a child himself, committed to nothing and no one, admitting he still doesn't know what he wants to be when he grows up.

Pan is playful and carefree, and after my divorce (and let's not even talk about that except to say it happened), that was all I wanted – someone to have fun with. But as the months went on, I realized that what I really wanted was to create the family I never had, where I got to be the loving, nurturing mother, married to the devoted, hands-on father, guiding a gaggle of brilliant, compassionate children. Where Roger taunted my mother, daring her to find a boyfriend, Pan encouraged me to find a real relationship, because he wanted me to be happy and knew that he could not be that person for me.

Then Ranger found me. My mother had to sneak around with Allen, and planned to fly to Mexico to obtain a divorce from her abusive husband. I went into a relationship with Ranger knowing all I had to do was tell Pan that I'd found what I was looking for, and he would wish me well without putting up a fuss. Of course, none of us expected me to be pregnant.

It's too soon to think of Ranger in terms of my baby's future step-dad, but at the same time, it's difficult not to. Because as we cuddle in his bed, drifting off to sleep, just a few hours after my big reveal, Ranger nuzzles my ear and says, “I wish it was mine.”

“So do I,” I say, hugging his arm, the only piece of him in reach. I send a brief prayer of gratitude that, unlike my mother, I don't have to sleep with one man while secretly carrying another man's baby. I thank the gods that I can be honest, and not get beaten or murdered for it.

Ranger pulls me closer, his nose and mouth buried in the hair on the back of my neck. “Maybe someday we can have one together.” he says.

“That would be wonderful.” I smile and fall asleep with one hand over my tummy, imagining a future with Ranger, in our own gated backyard, romping with our girls in the sunshine.

JULY

My first prenatal appointment takes place in a women's health center for lower income families. The waiting room is small, cramped, dimly lit and lacking warmth. The magazines are a couple of years old, and I wish I'd brought something to read. Two hours after my appointment time, a petite, pretty nurse who doesn't look old enough to drive a car finally takes me back. She weighs me, looks at a chart, and without even making eye contact says, "I'm sorry. Your BMI is over forty, which makes you high risk, and we don't see high risk patients."

At five feet, six inches and two hundred and eighty pounds, I expected that the doctor would advise me to lose weight. I did not expect the nurse to simply weigh me, and then dismiss me without even consulting the doctor.

If she bothered to test my blood sugar or take my blood pressure, I could point out that despite my weight, I am perfectly healthy, and that there happens to be a lot of heavy muscle beneath my fat from ten years of martial arts training. However, I'm so stunned and hurt, I can't put all these thoughts into words. I just stare at her for a moment, struggling to form a coherent response, as she scribbles on my chart. "So...where does a high risk woman on Medicaid get treatment?" I ask.

"You have to go to a hospital," she says, her back to me as she walks out the door.

Face burning, I stare straight ahead as I pass all the slender pregnant women in the waiting room. I make it into the driver's seat of my green Saturn sedan and shut the door before bursting into tears. I sob all the way to Ranger's house, which has become more home to me than my own. I sob alone on the floor by his bed for two hours before the humiliation, hurt, and

fear finally drain out of me, leaving me angry and determined to not be discriminated against because of my weight.

“I will not give birth in a hospital,” I write in a colorful rant on my MySpace blog. I announce that I will not be bullied into having my baby cut out of me, just because I'm fat. I will squat in a field all by myself before I'll set foot in a hospital. Trillions of women have given birth just fine in the last few million years, and so will I.

I witnessed an accidental home birth a few years earlier, the birth of my friend Hawthorn's second child. Hawthorn was my age, as tall as I but half my size, with long wavy brown hair and striking blue eyes, large eyes with a sapphire rim emphasizing the silvery blue, like the eyes of a husky, or an arctic wolf.

I loved spending time with Hawthorn, researching with her, learning about pregnancy and motherhood with someone who was actually experiencing it. Strangely enough, neither of us read about nor discussed labor or birth. We frequently went through baby name books in the Barnes and Noble bookstore while her slightly older and stockier husband, Dirigo, and my tall, skinny then-boyfriend, Alpheus, wandered around. At their apartment, we all took turns bathing, clothing, and entertaining their two-year-old, Ashton. Hawthorn tried to let me feel the baby kick, but every time I put my hand on her belly, the kicking would stop.

One night, Dirigo called to invite us over around 10 p.m. "We have an uncomfortable pregnant woman over here," he said, explaining that Hawthorn couldn't get comfortable, no matter what position she tried, sitting, lying, or standing.

While Dirigo and Alpheus played a computer game, Hawthorn and I talked about Ashton and his imaginary friends while she tried to find a position that would relieve the pressure in her

lower back. She finally resorted to pacing the room. We figured that if she were really in labor, it could potentially last a couple of days. Hawthorn and Dirigo both thought they should at least wait until the contractions started before heading to the hospital.

After a couple hours of restless pacing, Hawthorn finally decided to take a shower in hopes of finding relief in the hot water. She returned from the bathroom moments later, fully clothed and dry, and told her husband it was time to go to the hospital.

Dirigo laid their futon mattress on the floor for Hawthorn, and then threw together a bag to bring to the hospital. Hawthorn lay down, and a moment later her whole body stiffened as she swore under her breath. "Check the time," Dirigo said, as Hawthorn crushed his hand. It was 1:42 a.m.

Personally, I distrusted hospitals because of what one hospital did to my youngest aunt, a woman only six years my senior, and also half my size. The doctors told her that they would have to cut out her first child, and they did. She had a different doctor for her second child, who told her that the first hospital had purposely cut across the muscles she would use to push out the baby in natural birth, so that all of her future children would have to be birthed by cesarean. For her third child, my aunt gave birth naturally, which cost much less, and caused her much less pain.

I was afraid that if Hawthorn went to the hospital, they would make her give birth on her back, causing her to push the baby uphill, or worse, cut her open. I was afraid they would charge ridiculous amounts of money that Hawthorn and Dirigo couldn't possibly pay.

It irritated me that though women have been giving birth since the dawn of humanity, modern people tended to think that a man would know how to birth a baby better than a laboring

woman. I always planned on giving birth at home, and I had never doubted that I could give birth on my own if for some reason I was alone when I went into labor. But I had never given birth, so what did I know?

Hawthorn wanted to give birth in the hospital; so she told me from the beginning. But Hawthorn was a proud woman, and she did not like to show when she was in pain. No one knew when she started feeling the first contractions, because she didn't let us know, and she wasn't certain herself, since her first labor had been artificially induced. She later said it was about three hours before the really intense contractions started, and the first one came while she lay on the futon mattress in the living room floor.

Five minutes later, Dirigo helped Hawthorn to the bathroom at her request, where she intended to prepare herself for the ten-minute car ride to the emergency room. Alpheus sat at the computer. I sat on the couch, adrenaline surging through my body. Two minutes passed, and then I heard a big splash, and Hawthorn crying out, "Oh no! The baby!"

"What?" Dirigo asked, as he reached between her legs and caught his son. Alpheus and I clearly heard the baby's cries.

I hurried to the bathroom and asked Dirigo what he wanted us to do. He looked at me, dazed and bemused, his red beard dripping with the newborn's first urine. "Call an ambulance," he said, and laughed.

As much as I distrusted hospitals, at the time, I felt calling the ambulance was the safest thing to do, because not one of us knew what to do with the afterbirth, or how much blood there was supposed to be, or what symptoms in the baby might indicate a problem. They didn't have an infant seat installed in their van, and even if they did, we didn't cut the cord, and we didn't

know what we would do with the placenta after it came out. So Alpheus called the paramedics, who cut the cord, and had Hawthorn hold onto it as she walked down the stairs dressed in paper towels, having not yet passed the placenta.

Though the baby and mother both turned out perfectly healthy, the hospital kept them under observation. After a few days, the hospital finally let Hawthorn and newborn Rain come home. As the four of us sat around the living room, Hawthorn told us about the little exit class the hospital makes the postpartum patients take before they go home. She walked in among a room of women in wheel chairs, who all looked at her in amazement since they were all still in so much pain and she was cheerful and ready to go. We laughed, and in my head I filed away Hawthorn's experience as reinforcement of my plans to give birth at home.

“If I learned nothing else from witnessing Rain's birth,” I write in my blog, “I learned that natural birth is better on the mother, and that our bodies know what they are doing.” With a nod of finality directed at Ranger's computer, I slip out of his office chair and into the bed and his arms, to drift into the sleep of the emotionally spent.

Checking my email the following morning, I find concerned responses from my friends begging me to deliver my baby in a hospital so we don't both die. Did they miss the whole part about the accidental home birth being better on the mother than the planned hospital births? But the last note is from a friend I met at a spiritual gathering a couple years before, and he says that he has a friend in Orlando who happens to be a homebirth midwife, and he thinks she accepts Medicaid.

I call her immediately, and set my first appointment with her for the following week.

I walk out into the living room to find my ex-boyfriend, Alpheus, watching “Robot Chicken” episodes with current-boyfriend Ranger. Alpheus and I are still good friends, but I never expected Alpheus and Ranger to hit it off so well. They spend so much time together, sometimes I wonder if they are having the relationship and I'm the mutual friend.

Alpheus is the only boyfriend I've introduced to my Virginian relatives. Meemaw, Peepaw, and my aunts and cousins didn't know what to make of Alpheus at first, because he rarely spoke, and he would not look directly at anyone but me. Alpheus spent most of his time wandering around the Appalachian landscape with his camera, trudging through cornfields, and stealing fruit from orchards. He wanted me to go with him, but I always felt too tired, too nauseated, too engrossed in my reading.

When I was a girl, my family slept in Meemaw's basement on Christmas holidays. All of Meemaw's progeny brought their families to Meemaw's house, and we had a big Christmas meal, an unofficial annual reunion. I loved curling up beneath a quilt, watching my breath freeze in the golden light of dawn. My most cherished memories of my childhood all took place in Virginia, where I felt enveloped by love, accepted and wanted, unlike my childhood home in Florida, where I felt fat, ugly, and worthless. In Virginia, our many relatives practically swarmed us whenever we visited, making sure we ate plenty, talking to us about how different our lives were in the suburbs compared to their lives in the rural areas, taking us shopping and buying us gifts. In Florida, it was just our small family of five, with Dad almost always working, and Mom almost always angry, screaming at us, calling us names, bruising us for our disobedience.

A few days before Alpheus and I planned to return to Florida, Meemaw brought in an old three ring binder right next to me. “Thought you might want to see this,” she said. “It’s the family history going back six generations.”

I sat for a moment, staring at the dusty cover, and then opened the binder, revealing pictures of relatives long dead, obituaries, birth and marriage certificates, and family trees going back to the woman who birthed Meemaw’s father and my father’s father.

Seeing my interest in the binder, Meemaw walked out of the room momentarily, and returned with an old album containing pictures of my mother that I’d never seen, and a smaller album of pictures from her death and her funeral that I hadn’t seen since we took them when I was twelve. I took all three binders into the room where Alpheus and I slept, and sat with them on the bed, immersing myself in the past.

The first picture featured Mom in her air force portrait when she was twenty three, the same age I was as I looked at the picture for the first time, taken just before Roger tried to kill her. Her whole mouth was smiling, both of her eyes crinkled in pleasure, her hair short, but soft and curly. I thought there was a shadow in her eye, a carefully hidden misery, but perhaps I only saw it because I knew what her life was like at that age, and the horrors that awaited her in the small apartment she shared with Roger and three-year-old me in Maryland, near Andrews Air Force base. This is what my mother looked like when she was in love with her superior officer, pregnant with his baby, but married to my father, her rapist.

There was a picture of Mom’s closed casket of polished oak, the acoustic guitar she had so loved displayed in the foreground next to a little table with pictures of Mom, our family, and the folded flag that adorned her coffin at the funeral, reviving memories of the wake we’d held

for her before she was cremated. Some of my best memories of Mom involved her playing her guitar, trying to write a song, or singing with Rose and me.

Before she passed, Mom told me that she wanted me to have her guitar, and I diligently asked about it every time I visited Virginia after Mom's funeral, but it was not until this trip, when I drove up with Alpheus, that Meemaw finally pulled the guitar out of the attic and gave it to me. I couldn't wait to bring it home and learn to play. Right after I learned to play the keyboard I'd kept in my closet for six years. And right after I learned to draw, paint, and cook, like I'd been meaning to do. But I fully intended on learning to play that guitar.

Another picture showed Mom cradling my sleeping brother when he was five, a couple of years before she'd died. Her face was crooked and her hair was spiky instead of curly, but the expression on her face was so full of love and peace it brought tears to my eyes. I wished I could remember her looking at me like that. I can't remember her ever looking like that at me or Rose.

I found an old newspaper clipping titled "Five Generations." My mother's Great Grandma Nichols sat in the center, holding three-month-old me. Her daughter, my Great Grandma Young, sat to her right. Meemaw and my mother stood behind them. Mom's hair covered part of her face as she smiled down at me, hovering protectively.

My mother's senior portraits gave me a special thrill. The first thing I noticed was that she was wearing green velvet, and I flushed with pleasure, because I wore green velvet in my senior portraits as well. Mom's favorite color was blue, and I don't remember her ever wearing heavy velvet fabrics like the ones I favored, so these pictures left me imagining that Mom's spirit had guided me to choosing my dress just so I could feel a connection to her several years later, when Meemaw would show me these photographs.

For her portraits, Mom pulled her long auburn hair back from her milky, unblemished face. Her smile seemed guarded in two of the photographs, and contrived in the third. The fourth was missing, it's place in the little green cardboard holder sadly empty, leaving me feeling like a collector who was shorted the crowning glory of a long-awaited set.

My absolute favorite picture of my mother showed her snuggled up beneath a white quilt, lying on her belly, her hair short and tussled, smiling with her eyes closed. Other than her air force portrait, it was the only picture I'd ever seen of my mother with short hair and her mouth not crooked. It must have been taken just before Roger shot her.

Could Roger have taken that photo? Could Mom have looked so peaceful, so happy, with the man who had by that point abused her for four years? Or did my step-father take that picture during their affair? I wonder if Mom kept that picture hidden in a secret nook so that she could look at it and draw comfort from it when she was separated from her lover.

I found an envelope containing all of Mom's report cards with comments; all of them except eleventh grade. There was an honor roll certificate for the eleventh grade, though. Mom's sisters and brothers had told me about this church, how it teaches that women are inferior, property of men, and that people are inherently evil and must have Satan beaten out of them and Jesus drilled in. I hoped that even as a child Mom had thought for herself rather than buying into that load of crap. Since she converted to Buddhism after leaving Roger, I figured she must have.

The kindergarten report graded Mom on her citizenship, achievement, and health. In the comments each quarter, her teacher commented, "The Lord is helping Susan make progress. Thank the Lord!" Every report card had comments such as that, never comments about Mom, but comments about how great the Lord is. Was it a school, or a brain-washing institution?

Reading through each report, I found myself feeling proud that Mom got better grades in English and Science than in Bible studies.

In the last years of Mom's life, she tried to do everything she'd always wanted to do. She straightened her teeth, which I guess must have been a lifelong dream, but she wanted to be cremated, so I didn't see the point of suffering through braces. She sang with our Buddhist group, and started to write a song with her guitar. She enrolled in college courses on writing, and tried to learn Spanish. She was writing a children's book, and I have no idea what happened to that. She had so many dreams that she tried to achieve before her time ran out. I can't even imagine living every day of my life knowing for a fact that I wouldn't live to see my children grow up, or trying to decide which project to devote the most energy to, because I'd be lucky to live long enough to finish even one.

On the morning of my first appointment with my midwife, I wake up with the sun. In the still and quiet dawn, I remember how on mornings like this, when I was a child, I would pretend that I lived alone, like Ayla, the heroine of my favorite book series had to, when she was cast out from her family for being different.

The Earth's Children series were my favorite books ever since I found the three paperbacks at a garage sale when I was eight. As a child, every time we drove to Virginia, I read the first one on the way, the second whenever I had time to myself while we visited, and usually finished the third on the way back to Florida.

The books took place in the last ice age in Europe, and I loved to eat beef jerky, sunflower seeds, and pine nuts while I read them, because Ayla ate them. I loved watching the

animals in the woods, because Ayla observed animals when she taught herself to hunt. I collected plants and pretended to make medicines with them, because Ayla was a medicine woman. I loved pretending I was like Ayla, because if she could survive all that she went through, then I certainly could also.

“I can't believe I'm already thirteen weeks pregnant,” I say to myself as I park in a little mulch parking lot, beyond which lies my midwife's home and office. She lives very close to both Ranger's house and my apartment. I almost missed the long U-shaped driveway, as it was partly hidden by native foliage.

I clutch the steering wheel for a few minutes, taking deep breaths and trying to calm my racing heart. I tell myself that if she refuses me, I'll just have an unassisted home birth, but I know I'm lying. If this midwife says that I'm too high risk, I'll just have to swallow my fears about being forced into a cesarean section in a hospital, because even after watching Ricki Lake's documentary on birth options in America, *The Business of Being Born*, I still trust the outdated medical policies and procedures more than I trust myself.

Kelli's house is two stories, sky blue, with pretty murals of woodland creatures and flowers painted on the wall outside the rooms that serve as her office. I trace them with my fingers as I walk up the steps, then pause to enjoy the beauty of her wrap-around porch, decorated with crystal clusters and polished stones, tribal masks and statues from Africa, Australia, and South America, and potted orchids in full bloom.

Kelli follows a young, slender couple onto the porch in front of me, answering their questions. She does not break eye contact with them until they say good bye and pass me on the

steps, which allows me an opportunity to observe her without being subtle about it, even as I straighten my back and suck in my tummy.

Kelli is petite and slender with some muscle definition in her upper arms, accented by waist-length curly black hair and pale blue eyes enhanced by laugh lines. She has at least three visible tattoos on her arms, including a symbol with a wolf. When I ask about it, she tells me it represents her clan among the Seneca. After the young couple leaves, she greets me enthusiastically, with a bright, welcoming smile and a lingering hug, and on the way inside her office, she tells me that she has a twenty-two year old daughter named Ashley who is in labor this afternoon. I wonder why she's meeting with me instead of being with her daughter, but she doesn't seem concerned, and I don't want to sound like I'm criticizing, so I say nothing.

The bookshelves in her office hold books on labor, birth, and lactation as well as herbs, homeopathic medicines, packs of cloth diapers, organic prenatal supplements, and her own organic blend of herbal tea for pregnant women, of which she gives me a free sample, along with a two hundred page manual on home birth, with which to educate myself.

She sends me to her bathroom with a flimsy strip to dip in my urine stream, which measures maybe ten factors, including protein and sugar excretion, and different hormone levels. “Boring pee,” she says when I return it to her. “Excellent. That's exactly what we want to see.”

I am half in love with Kelli already, so I have to ask before my heart is totally set on having my baby with her. “So, am I too high risk?”

“Nope,” she says, smiling into my eyes. “You're only a two on the risk factor scale, and I only need to consult a physician with level three.”

“Then I was right about the other place discriminating against me because I'm fat,” I say.
“Bastards.”

Kelli laughs, and says, “Not to worry, I have lots of experience with larger women. Eating nutritious whole foods, exercising every day, and trusting your body and the process of birth – those are the factors that determine how your birth will go, not your size.”

I sniff back a few relieved tears, feeling the tension drain from my shoulders. I feel completely comfortable here, in this room, with this woman. For the first time since I saw those two lines, I feel relaxed and peaceful, and like I can trust that everything will work out for the best.

We go over my paperwork, including my medical history, and I explain my situation with the father, the boyfriend, and the not knowing where I'll live when I have my "home" birth. Kelli is very supportive, encouraging, and open to everything I say, which is wonderful, because I don't have anyone else in my life supporting my desire for a natural birth, or understanding my terror of having to birth in a hospital and possibly being forced into a major surgery from which, because of my obesity, might take me months or even years to fully recover, or even kill me or my child.

Kelli shows me an image of a fetus at thirteen weeks, and tells me that my baby has all his or her parts now, and is palm-sized. My second trimester will start in a couple of days, and my hormones should balance out, which will be wonderful. My baby is going to be growing fast and developing his or her organs. I'm probably going to be losing weight, as I plan to walk every day because Kelli says walking daily takes hours off of your labor, and I'll be eating a lot more raw fruits and veggies, as soon as I have money for groceries.

Then Kelli has me lie back on the day bed in her office, and lift my lower roll of fat so she can access the top of my uterus with the Doppler wand. She squeezes KY Jelly onto my belly just above my pubic area. Then, she touches the tip of the wand to my lubricated skin, pressing firmly and pausing frequently, searching for the right sound. "Hello in there," Kelli says as she searches. "Hold still so Mommy can hear your heartbeat for the first time!"

At first, all I can hear is a sound like someone rubbing the head of a microphone with the palm of her hand. But then there is a loud thump, which startles me. Kelli laughs.

"That was a kick," she tells me.

Soon after that we hear the steady thumping rhythm of my baby's heartbeat, and then the baby starts kicking and swimming around again, and Kelli has to chase him so we can hear it a bit longer.

"Baby's pulse is between one hundred and fifty and one hundred sixty beats per minute, as it should be." Kelli says.

I nod, struggling with my emotions, determined to not frighten Kelli by becoming a hysterical mess. Even though I *know* I haven't miscarried, and sometimes I think I feel the baby moving, until I heard my baby's heartbeat, part of me feared that there was no baby, that it was all in my head, that I've been making all these plans for nothing.

Part of me just can't accept that I am worthy of having my heart's most cherished dream come true. I'm fat, unemployed, unmarried, with nothing to show for my years of college except a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology, which will get me nowhere. I constantly start projects, never finish one, and waste far too much time on computer games, movies, television shows, and romance novels. I've never done anything that I could brag about on a resume, and my life has

been so full of immature drama that I have to consider the idea that I might be the source of it. What do I have to offer my child, other than love and devotion to his or her happiness? I don't feel like a mother. I still feel like a broken child.

But now I have a midwife. She is a Native American, Pagan-friendly, professionally licensed midwife who accepts Medicaid and has a doctor for back up in the off chance that transferring to a hospital becomes necessary. She plays the guitar, sings and writes her own songs, and travels around the world, hiking through the mountains of New Zealand and Peru, making friends with actual shamans and bringing their wisdom home. She is a Master Herbalist, and sells her own blend of medicinal teas. She is happily married with five children of her own, and she is my hero, the living embodiment of who I want to be when I grow up, Ayla incarnate.

As I lie in bed a few hours after hearing my baby's heartbeat for the first time, I close my eyes and imagine what my baby's life is like at this moment, what it's like to live in hot, wet, darkness, weightless, rocking to the rhythm as my world moves, massaged by the vibrations of sound, nothing to do but develop, grow, dream, and kick at the occasional invading Doppler wand.

AUGUST

I wake in the bright light of late morning without nausea for the first time in over two months, full of gratitude and happiness over the little treasure hidden in my navel. Ranger snores next to me, and I kiss his lips gently before slipping out of his bed.

I pour myself a bowl of frosted mini-wheat cereal and sit at the table across from Cordelia. Between us, sixteen month old Alexandria eats in her high chair. The little TV in the corner plays *Sesame Street*, which Alexandria watches with wide eyes as she shoves a handful of Cheerios into her mouth. “Good morning, sweet pea,” I say, kissing the side of her still mostly-bald head.

As I bring my first bite of cereal to my mouth, Alexandria points to the TV screen, and says, “Big Boyd!”

My full spoon plops back into my bowl.

“Of all the possible words,” I say with a laugh, as Cordelia and I share excited grins. “Her first word is Big Bird!”

Ranger joins us then, his hair sticking up and his face puffy from sleep.

“Alexandria just said her first word,” Cordelia tells him.

“That’s nice.” Ranger says, his back to us as he pours himself a huge bowl of the last of my mini-wheat cereal.

I glance at Cordelia, seeing my own disappointment mirrored in her expression. Ranger takes his breakfast to his computer in the living room and logs onto his game without even looking at his daughter.

I kiss Alexandria again, and put my bowl in the dishwasher before joining Ranger.

“You're not excited about her first word?” I ask him.

“It's not a big deal,” he says, shrugging. “All kids start talking eventually.”

I frown at the back of his head. I came into this relationship believing that Ranger was a family man who treasured his daughter. I have yet to see proof of the devotion he claims on his OkCupid profile. When I asked him about it, he told me that Alexandria's mother dumped the baby on him for a few months, during which time he came to love his child, and that's when he wrote his OkCupid profile. One day, the mother came and took Alexandria without telling him where they were going or if he'd ever see her again. Months passed before she demanded that Ranger babysit Alexandria so she wouldn't have to pay for day care. Now he's afraid to get close to Alexandria again, because her mother could up and take her, and he doesn't want to make himself vulnerable.

Part of me feels sympathetic, but the part of me that's about to be a parent thinks that he's either lying to himself or to me. I can't understand the concept of not loving a child, especially one's own child, and most especially when that child spends most of her time under his roof but he's too busy playing on his computer to spend time with her.

“Maybe we could take her to the park today,” I say, hoping that if Ranger spends some time with his daughter outside of the house, away from his computer, they might have an opportunity to bond.

“I don't have time to play with her,” Ranger says, as he has said every time I have tried this tactic. “Unlike some people in this house, I have work to do.”

His favorite character, a buxom red-headed elfin ranger, flies over verdant fields on Ranger's high definition wide screen monitor. I bite my tongue and retreat to curl up in the now empty bed, thinking that I can't let him see my hurt, or let myself get mad, because either option will just leave me frustrated and crying.

I can't make him love his daughter. I can only hope that he'll change his ways in the coming months before my baby is born. If he doesn't, I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't have anywhere else to go right now.

I no longer feel welcome in the apartment I'm renting, and I won't find any sympathy there, anyway. Morrigan told me flat out over the phone yesterday that I lured her to Florida so I could try to control her life, and that when I walked out of our apartment in tears that one night back in June, I walked out on our friendship.

Now the last of my money, the money I need to take care of myself and my unborn child, is draining away into an apartment in which I no longer feel welcome, into people who are no longer even pretending to harbor love for me. Alpheus, Dolphin, Ranger, and even Cordelia have been telling me to evict them for weeks. I know I should evict them. I just hate to do it, because as far as I know, they have nowhere to go. Maybe I shouldn't care, but I do.

I hate how, after everything I've done for her, Morrigan can sit there in the apartment I'm paying for and twist my actions, words, and intentions around to make it sound like I'm every bit as jealous, manipulative, abusive, and controlling as Roger was. I want to believe that she's delusional and completely wrong about me, but the more frustrated and angry I feel, the more I want to break something...or beat the living crap out of someone. I hate hearing her tinny voice

mocking me in the back of my mind, insisting that evil is genetic, and it runs in both sides of my family.

I can only imagine how victimized my mother must have felt, escaping her abusive father just to marry an abusive man who was old enough to be her father. She was only nineteen when she had me. She was only twenty three the first time she died.

Rose was four months old, and I was three and a half when it happened. We were at the babysitter's house, possibly napping. I'll never know exactly what played out in the small apartment we shared with Mom and Roger, but I have envisioned this single act of violence many times over the years, from many angles, starting with the bare bones of the story as Mom told it to me, and altering or adding details with every new bit of information my aunts, uncles, and Meemaw have shared with me in the fifteen years since Mom's final death. I've thought about the events of that day so often they have become as vivid as a memory to me, like one of those nightmares in which I was there, watching, yet unable to influence what happened.

On this cold January afternoon, my father slouched in his chair as he waited for my mother, his hair short and black, jaw scruffy, bloodshot eyes hidden by large square sunglasses, beer belly hanging over worn jeans. He looked up as my mother walked through the door.

She was beautiful then, her skin milky and unblemished, curly auburn hair shorn to military standard, sapphire eyes sparkling with anger. She dropped her purse on the table on her way to the bedroom and returned with a suitcase.

"Where are you going?" Roger asked, rising.

"To Mexico, to divorce your worthless ass," she snapped, brushing past him and jerking her suitcase free of his grip.

“You can't leave me,” he yelled at the closing door, and stared at it, waiting for it to open, and for his wife to return to him and beg him for forgiveness.

But the door didn't open, and his home was empty. He fell into his chair, hands over his face, sobbing. “You can't leave me. You can't take my babies.”

Through splayed fingers he glimpsed a blurry blob of red. Mom's purse was still sitting on the table.

Roger stood then, staggered to the seldom-used hall closet. He pulled the gun from its hiding place on the shelf, the gun he'd bought when he first realized she might actually try to leave him.

Mom stormed back in, swearing under her breath, and seized her purse. She froze when she noticed the gun, and Roger's face, red and contorted with rage and pain.

Through the pounding pulse in his ears, Roger heard Mom scream. He lunged for her as she turned, knocking his chair over. As they raced for the open door, he squeezed the trigger.

The gun fired a few feet from her neck.

Mom's body fell through the doorway, blood pooling around her head, soaking the brown carpet in the dim hallway.

Roger dropped the gun and fumbled for the phone, dialed 911. “I just shot my wife,” he said. “I just shot...my wife...”

He dropped the phone and stepped over Mom's body, stumbling down the dark hallway.

The police arrested Roger at a party down the road a few hours later. That fact haunts me. What kind of monster shoots a woman, intending to kill her, and then spends the rest of the afternoon at a party?

He died in jail less than two years later, when I was five, leaving Mom free to marry Allen. My earliest memory of Allen is when he tickled me so I couldn't cry the day Mom told me that my Daddy was dead. He was only twenty-two, had never experienced the loss of a loved one, and didn't understand that I needed to cry. I was only five; I didn't have words for how I felt then, but the emotions are still as vivid as the memory, and as an adult I can say that being forced to laugh when my heart felt shattered confused the hell out of me, and felt like a betrayal of the love I felt for my father.

Tears must have made Allen uncomfortable, because throughout my childhood, and even into my early adulthood, whenever he caught me crying, he'd call me a baby and tell me to suck it up. I still feel ashamed of myself when I cry, even as the refrain from a song I learned in elementary school plays in my head, "It's alright to cry, it can take the sad out of you. It's alright to cry, it might make you feel better."

I don't want my child to ever feel ashamed over his or her tears. Recent scientific research has proven that through our tears, we shed stress hormones. Crying really does make us feel better, even if it makes our faces swell and our heads ache. I don't want my child to hold all the pain, frustration, and helplessness inside, like I always have.

For most of my life, especially since my mother's death, my emotions have seemed trapped in a stagnant bubble somewhere in my middle. From that moment, at 3:45 a.m., on December 27, 1993, when Dad knocked on my door, waking me to tell me my mother had

passed, I've felt a buzzing sort of nothing. Sometimes the nothing swelled inside me, pressing and pressing until I couldn't breathe, until I either laughed hysterically or screamed with rage. Sometimes, especially when people were talking about Mom, the nothing would fill my head with a dizzy roaring buzz, drowning out all sound and thought. But the nothing rarely let me cry, especially in the first year.

From the moment when Dad rushed us through the dark living room, too quickly for me to see her body no matter how I contorted my neck, I've been looking for my mother. Even after her funeral in Virginia, I kept looking for my mother. She came to me in my dreams and told me it had all been a mistake, and she wasn't really dead at all. I'd wake up and jump out of bed in a hurry to continue our conversation, then freeze and fold in half, hyperventilating as reality hit me.

My mother was an incredibly strong woman. She survived against all odds for nine years after being shot in the back of the neck at point blank range. She walked up until the last months of her life, though the doctors said she never would be able to walk or even feed herself again. She fought Roger's mother for custody of us, and won. She gave birth to Junior just fifteen months after the shooting, and he was her miracle baby because he did not contract the HIV virus from her. She lived out the rest of her life reminded every moment that she was going to die, that her kids were going to grow up without a mother, and that she wouldn't get to see us grow up and marry and have kids of our own. I think it was her faith that got her through all of that; her faith made her strong.

While recovering from the shooting, Mom met a Japanese woman who taught her about Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism. Mom learned to chant the powerful words “*Nam-myoho-rence-kyo*,” which she believed helped her heal, grow stronger, and win custody of her daughters. By the time my sister and I joined her in California, Mom was a devout Buddhist, as was Allen, and that is how they raised us.

Every morning and evening Mom and Allen would kneel in front of our family altar and chant “*Nam-myoho-rence-kyo*,” and recite *gongyo*, a set of prayers in ancient Japanese, similar to a Catholic repeating the Rosary in Latin, knowing what it means without being fluent in the language. On special evenings, I came home from a day of horseplay with the neighborhood boys to find our house full of people chanting in ancient Japanese. I would place my filthy sneakers just inside the doorway, next to the rows of heels and loafers, and kneel in front of the altar among a dozen people of all races and ages.

Our altar was a small wooden table with a glass overlay. At its foot sat a large black bell in the shape of a bowl, which rested on a red pillow in the shape of an open lotus blossom. A wooden offering bowl containing seasonal fruit sat in the center of the table, just above a shiny black rectangular censer filled with ash of the sweet, musky incense daily burned within it. On either side of the bowl sat matte black vases of fresh cut greens and white pillar candles in candle holders the same shiny black as the censer, with white pictographs of cranes, their wings encircling their side-turned heads, arranged so the beaks pointed to each other.

Behind the altar stood our *butsudan*, a tall, broad rosewood cabinet with convex doors that, when both were left open, suggested the offering of a hug. The base of the *butsudan* had

floral engraving on the doors, which kept our prayer books, prayer beads, and several short T's of wood which we stuck under our butts while kneeling so our ankles suffered less.

The *butsudan* housed our *gohonzon*, a small rectangle of rice paper on which priests of the Taisekiji Temple in Japan had painted sacred texts in Ancient Japanese. It was an exact replica of the *Dai Gohonzon* created by the founder of our Buddhist sect, Nichiren Daishonen.

Kneeling, we chanted a mantra in ancient Japanese, "*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*," which in briefest summary, meant "dedication to the path of the teachings of peace and enlightenment." Mom had explained to me that the *gohonzon* was not a deity; it didn't receive our chanted prayers, then grant or deny them. Rather, by chanting we put the power to change our lives into our own hands; we raised energy, focused it on our desired goal, and released it into the universe. According to the Law of Karma, if I chanted for something that would cause someone to suffer, I would suffer for it. If I chanted for something that would cause happiness, I would be happy too.

While we chanted, it wasn't my own voice that my ears drew in, nor any individual voice, but the pulse of the room, the rhythm that echoed through my veins, contracting and expanding my pupils, filling my body with a blissful buzz.

After an hour or so, Mom would ring the bell three times, and we slowly enunciated each syllable of the chant for three final repetitions. In silence, we paused for a moment, soaking in the energy of the room, which thickened the air with a fuzzy warmth that settled on our skin like a down comforter fresh from the dryer. Then we stretched legs stiff from kneeling, shook awake sleeping feet, smiled and laughed informally with each other for a few minutes while arranging ourselves into a circle to discuss the teachings of Nichiren Daishonen. Afterwards, we would

share our "experiences," the blessings of our daily lives, then eat, drink, and go our separate ways.

Some people, having suffered a profound injustice, decide that there is no God, and revile people who have faith. Others become religious zealots, and revile people of different faiths. For a while, especially during my teenage years, I fell in the former category, putting all of my faith in science and making religion, especially Christianity, my scapegoat for all the bad things in the world.

My mother, having been raised in a zealous environment, chose a middle path. She converted to a faith that empowered her to change her own life, and though she remained strong in her faith until the very moment of death, she did not push her beliefs on anyone, nor force her children into it. She encouraged us to explore different faiths and learn which fit us best. There are two gifts my mother has given to my unborn child, two things that I as an adult have learned from reflecting on my childhood, that I will happily pass on to the next generation: self-empowerment, and an open mind.

When I was growing up, our next door neighbors were Catholic, and I went to Mass with them once. Their church was large and solemn, with uncomfortable hardwood pews. The altar was interesting, but so far from where we sat that all I could make out was a pale altar cloth and a bunch of candles. The priest droned on about God punishing sinners, which made no sense to me, and I never felt a desire to go back and learn more.

Later, I attended a Baptist church with a little girl who lived directly behind my house. Her name was Ashley too, but she was four years younger than I, and our friendship didn't last very long.

I could remember being baptized as a toddler, because every once in a while the memory came back to me in the form of a nightmare. In the nightmare, I wore my prettiest red dress, standing in front of an altar in a large room full of gray people who sat uniformly in pews. A faceless preacher dunked me over and over. I couldn't breathe. I stared through the water at his dark, blurry form, struggling to reach the air, fighting the large hand that held me down.

Despite the nightmares, I enjoyed Sunday school those few weeks. They had memorization contests of Bible passages, and I out-memorized all the other kids each week. But I asked too many questions.

"Why would God create man in his image, but give His power to woman?" I asked, on what turned out to be my last morning of Sunday school, ever.

"Why...How..." The young, peppy Sunday school teacher sputtered at my question. "What power do you think women have?"

Oh, how many answers I would have for her now. I could refer her to the poems of Maya Angelou, or take her to see *The Vagina Monologues*, were they in town. But when I was ten, I was limited to what I'd read in the Bible, so I only had one answer for her.

"Creation," I said. "If God created everything, and made man to be like Him, how come he gave woman the power to create more men? How come men can't create anything?"

She stared at me, while the other kids giggled and whispered. "The Bible says God created *man* in his image, and made women to serve men."

“I know what it says,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But it doesn’t make sense. And what was Adam doing that was so hard that he needed Eve to serve him? I thought it says he was just lonely, and Eve was a friend for him, not his servant.”

“It’s not for little girls to question the Word of God,” the teacher said, now red-faced and huffy, and she turned her back to me to write the next lesson on the board.

The next week, little Ashley and her mother left for church without me. She wasn't allowed to talk to me after that, and her mother just shut the door in my face when I came over to ask why.

The hurt, the feeling that I had committed some terrible wrong out of ignorance, became a common feeling for me, especially after Mom died. The little bit of self-confidence and self-esteem I've managed to gather in the years after I escaped my mother's abuse and my adoptive father's emotional neglect is easily shattered by the disapproval of others, especially the disapproval of people I love.

Morrigan has used that particular weakness to manipulate me many times. For most of my adult life, I have been so sensitive and fragile that a disagreement with someone I didn't even know over the Internet would send me spiraling into near-suicidal depression for days, if not weeks.

I can't afford to be weak and fragile with a baby on the way. I want my child to grow up confident, healthy, and secure, and so I must become those things myself. I can't teach what I don't know.

I'm praying for strength and confidence as I approach the door to the apartment I called home just a few months ago, drawing support and strength from Dolphin and her husband, Aries, who stand on either side of me. I don't think Morrigan would pull her gun on me, though I can't remember what happened to the gun she bought as protection from her ex-husband. However, Moocher killed a man when he was thirteen, and spent his formative years in prison. There is no doubt in my mind that he is capable of violence. I pause in the middle of sliding my key into the lock, reconsidering whether I want to involve police.

But I have a six foot tall black belt by my side, and her husband can be tall and imposing, and I'd hate to overreact and waste a police officer's time. I slide the deadbolt out of the lock, turn the knob, and push in the door slowly, saying, "Hello?"

Before I take a step inside, I know that Morrigan and Moocher are not there. A glance to the parking lot behind us confirms that her car is missing, but it's the silence and sense of emptiness that convinces me.

We walk inside and find the apartment full of trash and randomly scattered junk. The carpet is no longer beige, by any leap of the imagination. The oven has a couple inches of charcoal lining the bottom, and the inside of the microwave frightens me, but Morrigan and Moocher are nowhere to be found. Their computer is gone, but the furniture and dishes remain. Their bedroom is stripped bare of everything except the mattress and box springs I'd bought them.

I find a thick stack of paper pinned to my bedroom door. I say that I have no interest in reading the letter. I know its contents were specifically designed to eat away at whatever happiness and self-confidence I've managed to build up in the last month or so. However,

Dolphin knows that I will probably end up reading the letter when they are gone, and she no doubt hopes that by making light of it, she can spare me some hurt.

My relationship with Dolphin has always been like the relationship that I imagine exists between a mother and her adult daughter.

I met Dolphin two weeks after Mom died. Every day at school, while we walked between classes, she would come up with creative ways to insult people to amuse herself. She practiced her insults on me, much like Mom used to insult me all the time, minus the cruel intent. “If your nose were any further in that book, you’d have to check for snot,” she’d say, or some other snarky observation about my nerdiness or lack of socialization skills. I latched onto her as if she were the only familiar thing in an unfamiliar world.

For most of the last fifteen years, I have trusted Dolphin to handle the “grown-up” issues of life, so I didn't have to educate myself about them. I trusted her view of all things political, legal, and “real world.” Because of this relationship and reliance, I was free to be childlike, forever a teenager. While Dolphin was responsible, saved money, graduated *sum cum laude*, and focused on her career in data analysis, I spent money faster than I brought it in, graduated late, and then spent eight years in grad school, all the while focused on my personal life.

But the moment I discovered I was pregnant, all that changed. I instantly grew up. My childlike behaviors faded away so quickly I didn't even realize it was happening until they were gone. I no longer trusted Dolphin's view of the world implicitly. I started researching things myself, using her opinion as part of my research rather than as the answer.

I understand now that Dolphin has been my transitional mother-figure. But I'm going to be a mother before she will, and that changes everything. I can't go to her for advice on the care and feeding of infants or toddlers, or childbirth, or childrearing.

But I can accept her support and protection in whatever form she offers. Right now, Dolphin offers them in the form of reading aloud and mocking a ten page letter written to me by Morrigan, detailing what a horrible person Morrigan thinks I am and recasting our entire friendship in light of her new opinion of me. Morrigan says she's glad I was fired because I was a horrible teacher, and she hopes I never find teaching work again, and that she feels sorry for my unborn child, because she's sure I'll be a terrible mother.

I laugh along with Dolphin and Aries at their snarky criticism of Morrigan's words, saving my tears for a later time, when I can deal with my shattered heart in private.

A few hours later, back at Cordelia's house, I snuggle on the recliner with Alexandria, smiling into her eyes while I sing her to sleep to the rhythm of Ranger typing at his computer behind us, tears leaking from the corners of my eyes. I love this little girl so much. I love the child inside me even more.

I hope Morrigan is wrong about me.

SEPTEMBER

As I sit on the screened patio where Morrigan and I used to chain-smoke while making each other laugh so hard we cried, I crave a cigarette for the first time since I quit smoking three months ago. I want to gorge myself on chocolate and cheese and chocolate cheesecake. I want to curl into a ball and just cry until the world makes sense. I won't give in to any of these cravings, however, because someone might see me, and of course, because none of them would be good for the baby.

Instead, I watch a family of four white ibises stalk through the unnaturally green grass between the brown brick apartment buildings, jabbing insects and lizards with their hooked beaks, completely absorbed in their own lives. Someone blasts hip hop music from a balcony. A couple I can't see scream insults at each other, while the sun shines merrily through the gentle trees.

I learned in an undergraduate psychology class that there are five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I thought I'd already been through them all these last couple of weeks, but I've relived them all again today, with each failed attempt to clean up the mess Morrigan left behind.

I told myself on the way over here that I don't love Morrigan anymore, and that nothing I could find in the apartment we used to share could possibly hurt me anymore, not after hearing that letter she left me read aloud by my best friend. I've never been more wrong. I think, perhaps, the stages of grief are more of a cycle than a progression, an endless loop in which I seem to be trapped.

After fifteen years, I still grieve my mother. Sometimes I think it's not really about her, but about my loss, the fact that I will never have a mother to meddle in my life, or give me a guilt trip for not calling or visiting. She'll never invite me over for dinner, go shopping with me, or call just to say hi. She'll never tell me she's proud of me, or that she loves me.

I have accepted the fact of my mother's death, but the anger and depression have yet to fade. Maybe I need therapy, or maybe my faith will help me, as my mother's faith helped her.

The more I think about it, the more similarities I find between my current faith and my mother's faith. I think I took the Buddhist philosophy of my childhood and expanded on it, rather than “converting” to Paganism. Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism taught us that by chanting sacred words, we could manifest our desires. My personal understanding of Paganism takes the same concept, but sees it in terms of raising and directing energy, then releasing it to the Universe, while simultaneously working towards the goal on the mundane level. I could chant for hours, or cast the witchiest of spells, in order to score a new job, but if I don't fill out any applications, send out a resume, or at the very least tell someone that I'm looking, the universe is going to have a difficult time giving one to me.

As a child, I learned about the Law of Karma, that what we send out returns to us, good for good, bad for bad. I learned that every action affects seven lifetimes previous and seven lifetimes in the future, and that our souls reincarnate over and over until we reach Buddhahood, or union with God. The goal of Buddhism is to negate all bad karma collected over the last seven lifetimes with good acts in the present and future lifetimes, until our souls are totally pure, and we are finally good enough to become one with God, or to stay separate, like an angel, in order to help others purify themselves.

That last bit is where Buddhism and I part ways. I believe in manifest divinity – that everything that exists is part of, for lack of a better term, God, and that everything is therefore sacred, from the tiniest particle of an atom to the largest galaxy, and that there are many sacred bits that are simply beyond human understanding. To me, the purpose of life is not to perfect oneself until we are good enough to become one with God. Rather, we *are* God, and the purpose of life is to help God by doing what comes naturally - learning, growing, and changing. I see humanity as organelles in a cell in the body of God. We are miniscule, but essential, even if we are never able to pull away far enough to see the Whole.

I don't know for sure how I will end up guiding my child on his or her spiritual path. While I'm still pregnant and having a hard time imagining my child walking, let alone seeking spiritual wisdom, I plan to simply be open with my practices without requiring my child's participation, to tell stories about how I came to believe what I do when the opportunity presents itself, and to encourage my child to question everything and trust his or her intuition.

I was thirteen when I realized that I was not really Buddhist. It was a year after my mother died, when Dad brought me to Japan for a ten day pilgrimage to our sect's most sacred temples. He told me that he felt I was old enough to appreciate the religious significance of the trip, and the emotional significance of visiting the overseas half of my mother's resting place. He had brought half of Mom's ashes to the temple complex a few weeks after her death.

I could almost forget that I was on the other side of the planet, until I stepped outside and glanced at the horizon, where Mt. Fuji stood violet against the bright blue sky. I never saw a cloud in Japan, except for the cloud of cherry blossoms swirling around me as I walked beside my dad down the sunlit brick road to see with our own eyes the most sacred relic of our religion.

All Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist households possessed a *gohonzon*, a small piece of rice paper hand-painted by a priest with sacred symbols that represented the teachings of our founder, Nichiren Daishonin. The *Dai Gohonzon* was the original, painted by Nichiren himself, or by one of his first disciples.

The air smelled sweet and clean that morning, nothing like the swampy air I swallowed every day at home in Florida, and nothing like the earthy Appalachian air I loved in Virginia. We made our pilgrimage silently, approaching a large building filled with hundreds of people from all over the world, all kneeling, heads bowed over their folded hands, rubbing their prayer beads rhythmically in time to the steady chanting of *nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. The *Dai Gohonzon* was much larger than the *gohonzon* we kept at home in our *butsudan*, our personal shrine. All the faces of the people around me appeared full of awe, moved by the presence of the relic.

I couldn't feel it. I looked at Dad and saw the same reverence in his face as in the strangers around us. It bothered me that I didn't feel it. I was in Japan, on a sacred pilgrimage to our family's religion's most holy site, and I felt nothing. Vaguely curious, maybe. Very uncomfortable. I was missing something, and I had no idea what it could be.

When we left the shrine, Dad led me away from the crowd to a door where a few people waited in line. He'd arranged for me to speak to a priest.

I gaped at him. "What am I supposed to talk about?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Anything you want. That's what they're here for."

I recognized the lady who went before me. Her name was Verna, and she was an African-American woman with white hair who wore gold and silver sequined clothes, which suited her personality perfectly. When she left the priest's room, she was wiping tears from her

eyes. I wondered what a priest could say to a jovial, vivacious woman like Verna to make her cry. And then I was sitting there, in front of him, having no idea what I was expected to do or say.

The priest wore a traditional kimono of dark blue and white. His head was shaved, and his face looked very young while his eyes seemed rather old. I couldn't read his emotions from his face like I could with most people. He just looked peaceful and patient, while I felt awkward and silly.

I knelt before the serene priest and grasped for a question, any appropriate question, and finally, I just asked about generic things like karma and the purpose of *gongyo*. I felt like I should have had some practice sessions at home before being thrust in front of a Taiseki-ji priest. As we walked back to our temporary home, I felt disappointed. Everyone around me seemed to be having this deep spiritual experience, and all I was feeling was numbness, punctuated by wild bursts of frustration and pain.

Seven years later, I would finally understand that I had been seeking a sense of oneness, of family, home, and belonging. I would not have that sense of homecoming in my spiritual practices until I studied Wicca and Witchcraft with Hawthorn and Dirigo in my early twenties, and I would continue to feel it in my mid and late twenties at the Pagan festivals and public rituals that I would attend on my own.

A few days before my crisis of faith, Dad had led me to the monument that held ashes of deceased Buddhists, a cylinder of white cement held aloft by several cement pillars, open to the sky. He told me he'd made sure to uphold Mom's wishes, and that half of her ashes rested

somewhere in this giant Japanese tomb, the other half in the Virginian Appalachians that she'd adored.

Then he crumpled. My stoic, ex-military father, who worked seven days a week, including working at home on evenings and weekends, wrapped his arms around me and sobbed into my shoulder.

I froze. I didn't know how to respond. No one had ever held me when I cried. I thought that I should know what to do, how to comfort my sobbing dad, but all I could do was chew my lip and pat his back until he regained control of himself and released me.

He thought I cried too. I let him think so.

The truth was that I couldn't cry for Mom. I tried. I wanted to cry. I figured I was supposed to. Everyone else cried. But whenever I thought of my mother, of never seeing her again, I just felt frozen, numb, incompetent, and still unable to accept the reality of her demise.

Fifteen years later, when I think of what crying was like for me as a child, I remember being alone, in a dark room, feeling worthless and unlovable. I can't remember a single time that a loving adult held me, or sought to comfort me in any way, other than Dad tickling me the day my mother told me that Roger was dead. I hope that piece of my childhood will serve as a reminder for me after my child is born, so that I never leave him to cry alone in the dark, and so that he will always feel his mother's arms around him, offering comfort and love, even when I'm frustrated, and especially when he's hurting. I hope my child will know how to give comfort as well as accept it.

Later that same day, while kneeling and chanting with Dad and the other pilgrims at a holy site, I literally nodded off, startled awake by the sensation of my chin slapping my chest.

With the time difference, the seventeen hour flight, and the excitement of being in a foreign country for the first time, I had not slept in nearly two days. Dad noticed my exhaustion, and told me to go back to bed, so I dragged myself out of the temple. Looking back, I wonder what the hell he was thinking, sending his thirteen-year-old daughter who could barely keep her eyes open, to find a bed in a land where few spoke English. But at the time, I wandered down the streets, too tired to think or feel, guided by intuition and the vision of a futon and a blanket. When I stumbled into the house we'd slept in the night before, a Japanese woman that I assumed was the priest's wife appeared surprised to see me, but she took one look at me and helped me drag out the futon. I fell asleep before she walked away.

It was mid-afternoon when I woke. I was alone in the priest's house. I didn't know what time it was, or when anyone would return. I grabbed my camera, a notebook, and a pencil, and started walking. I didn't have any particular destination in mind when I left. I simply wanted to explore, to have an adventure, to feel a lighthearted sense of fun in my heart, like kids were supposed to feel. When my feet led me to the monument, I thought I would turn around. But instead I sat on a step beside a bed of river stones and stared at the river in front of me, unaware that I was about to have what I would later consider my first taste of a Pagan spiritual experience.

I watched the sparkling water swirl around neatly spaced stones, felt the breeze brush my hair from my face. Birdsong, swaying trees, and rushing water replaced the buzzing numbness in my head, easing the tension from my neck and shoulders. I hugged my knees to my chest, closed my eyes, and, breathing deeply, I achieved a state of meditation for the first time, though I wouldn't know to call it that for another few years.

As the sunlight crept closer to my sneakers, I heard a melody in my head. I picked up my notebook and wrote a song. I sang it as I wrote, quietly, so the few people walking by wouldn't hear me. "As I walk down a lighted path, tears streaming down my eyes, I know why I came here. I came to say goodbye." As I sang, the tears flowed. I released my hair from my ponytail so I could hide my face from curious eyes, real or imagined.

When I finished the song, I dried my cheeks and swallowed the sobs. Now that I desperately wanted to be alone, there seemed to be people everywhere; laughing, excited people, oblivious to my needs. As I shifted my weight, preparing to stand, a stone caught my eye. Among the thousands of stones lining the path beside me, a single green stone lay on a bed of gray. It was warm to the touch, though it had been in the shade, and it fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. Its shape suggested to me a mother holding an infant, and tears surged from my eyes all over again as I held the stone to my chest, thinking of it as a gift from my mother.

I still keep that stone, and when I'm feeling especially nervous or vulnerable, I draw comfort from holding it. It fits perfectly in my palm, with a smooth area for my thumb to stroke, the perfect "worry" stone. I slipped it into my pocket just before I came over to the apartment this morning, intending to just burn the stupid letter, clean the rooms and toss the junk they left behind, get my stuff, and leave this glaring reminder of broken trust behind me forever.

Instead, I'm sitting here on the patio, reading the stupid letter, and crying like a wounded child. The words in the letter hurt even more now, emphasized by the message in my floor. When I started to clean and pack this morning, I discovered that Morrigan and Moocher dumped bags of garbage, including copious amounts of soiled underwear, all over my bed, my altar, and

the floor between the two. Morrigan just tossed haphazardly into the floor of my room all the little inexpensive gifts I'd bought for her from bookstores over the years, all the jewelry, perfume oils, the journal, and the wand of willow and moonstone that I personally made for her by hand, every token of love I ever sent to her in care packages over the years. I find every letter I've ever written to her scattered throughout the detritus, in a clear message about what I mean to her now.

Unsurprisingly, Morrigan stole hundreds of dollars worth of essential oils from me, which I used to craft perfumes, bath salts, and body scrubs. Thankfully, I'd thought to take most of my valuables out of the apartment shortly after our friendship fell apart. But the betrayal, the theft, the emotional attacks, all fill me with a raging sense of injustice. I want to forgive, forget, let go, and move on with my life, but I need help.

My mother would have chanted to the *gohonzon* for peace, but as I discovered in Japan all those years ago, her faith could not satisfy me. Thankfully, over the past seven years, I've grown into a faith that can. Sitting on the patio floor with the hateful letter in my lap, I notice a bag of discarded tea light candles on the floor directly in front of me. I need to seek communion, to replace the ache and anger with peace and comfort, and candles are one tool that help me get into the proper frame of mind. I pull out five candles and light them one at a time, reciting an invocation that I wrote just before Morrigan moved in with me.

“I call the breath of life, the breeze that sings through the trees, the Air that shapes this world.” Eyes closed, I focus on the sensation of the breeze through the screen blowing my hair from my face.

“I call the inner heat, the sun that warms away the fog, the Fire that shapes this world.” I feel the sun heating my feet, the only part of me not currently sheltered by the shade.

“I call the cleansing fluid, the sea that birthed all life, the Water that shapes this world.” I imagine immersing myself in the ocean, the ebb and flow gently rocking me, as a bead of sweat rolls down my back.

“I call the strength of form, the land that provides structure and shelter, the Earth that shapes this world.” I acknowledge the solidness of the ground beneath my feet as I visualize walls of rock rising in a circle, forming a cave around me.

“Honored God, Lord of the Day Who illuminates the path through all obstacles; Loving Father who embodies the cycle of sacrifice and gain; Wise Sage who teaches us to learn from the past; I call you to me and ask for your strength, protection, and comfort.” Speaking the words aloud puts me in a sacred frame of mind, amplifying my senses, raising goose bumps all over my body.

“Beloved Goddess, Lady of the Night Who guides us through intuition and dreams; Loving Mother who soothes away our fears and pain; Wise Crone who leads us along the never-ending spiral of life and death; I call on Your Morrigan aspect.” Morrigan, a goddess of war generally recognized as a hater of men, is often called upon by victims of rape and domestic violence as a force of healing and justice. I visualize the Celtic Goddess in full studded-leather armor, floating from the sky to the entrance of my cave, Her black hair flowing around her head like a reverse halo as ravens, one of her main symbols, settle on the ground around her.

“One who calls herself by your name has betrayed me, Morrigan, stolen from me, taken almost everything I had and hurt me with every weapon with which I naively armed her.” In the cave conjured by my mind, I sit at Morrigan's feet and detail every wrong I feel my former friend

has committed against me over the last few months, reliving each moment, pouring my pain into a cast-iron cauldron at her feet.

“Morrigan,” I say aloud, eyes closed, hugging myself. “I ask for justice. If I have done wrong, please show me what I did, and how to make it better. If I have been wronged, please let Karma kick some major ass. And please do not let that bitch profit from anything that she took from me.”

I hold the ten pages of venom in my hands, and consider burning them, but choose to keep them instead, to reread should Morrigan repeat her pattern of reappearing the next time she needs emotional, or financial, support. I want to make sure that I don't give in to the needy part of myself that wants everyone to like me. I need to be a good example for my child.

I thank the Goddess as Morrigan for her help, visualizing her return to the sky, taking the cauldron with her, and I ground the cave back into the earth. Though my heart still aches, I feel more peaceful and centered. I have complete faith that my former friend will get what's coming to her, and that my life will be better for her absence. I thank the God, the Goddess, and the elements, blow out the candles, and enter the apartment through the sliding glass door, determined to make a dent in the mess before I return to Ranger's house.

A couple of weeks after my impromptu ritual, on the way to my first sonogram appointment, I realize that my mother would have turned forty-seven that very morning. While musing about what I'll see in the sonogram, whether I'm carrying a boy or a girl, I sing a Savage Garden song, “I Knew I Loved You before I Met You.” The baby kicks to the rhythm of the

song, and the day becomes even more special, because this is the first time I'm sure that it's the baby I'm feeling, and not just gas.

At the office, I lie on a bed that feels more like a table, wearing one of those paper robes that ties at my neck but barely covers my breasts, much less my belly or groin. I impatiently await the return of the sonogram technician with a sheet folded across my lap. It's like a freezer in here. I swear I can see my breath.

I wish my mother could be here with me. I wish I could ask her how she felt when she was pregnant with me. Even more, I wish she could be sitting beside me, eagerly anticipating this first view of her first grandchild.

I wish Ranger were here, that he were interested, or at least wanting to share this experience with me. He said he'd already seen it with Alexandria, and it wasn't that exciting. I decided I'd rather go alone than drag him along, that it would hurt me more to have him there but bored.

I wish Pan cared about this life he started growing inside me, and that I could share this moment with him. Or that my best friend could be here, or my sister, or Dad, or freaking *anyone*. In the silence, I feel unwanted, unimportant, and I hate it. I don't want my baby to ever feel this way.

Finally, the young woman who will be my guide and only companion during this pivotal moment enters the room brandishing a tube of KY Jelly. She smiles in greeting, then stares doubtfully at my belly, as if at a loss of how to begin.

“Here,” I say, lifting my lower belly roll, revealing the arc of womb buried beneath.

“Thanks,” the technician says, looking relieved. She squirts the lubricant on the bared skin, and applies a tool similar in shape to the Doppler wand that Kelli uses to amplify my baby's heartbeat during the prenatal visits.

On the screen in front of me I see swirls and blobs in black and white, with no idea of the context, or what I'm looking for. She presses hard with the wand, bruisingly hard, and finally an alien straight out of an Area 51 movie shows up on the screen. It's creepy and fascinating.

“There's his head,” she says. The baby keeps backing away from the pressure of the wand, so the image of the screen shifts from what almost looks human to a moving skull, to a circular blob. I laugh when the baby kicks and twists away. I hope the wand isn't causing the baby any pain or discomfort, but I like that the baby is interacting with us.

The technician silently takes pictures, then captures a video of the baby's heartbeat, capturing a sneeze and hiccups in the process. She asks me if I want to know the baby's gender, and I say yes. When I first found out I was pregnant, I thought I wanted to be surprised, but five months along, I find that I just can't take the suspense.

The baby does not cooperate, however. After a few minutes of butt shots without a clear look at the groin, the technician offers to use the vaginal wand, hoping we can see more from that angle. I give permission, and then almost take it back when I see the size of the vaginal wand. I am about to ask how she expects that thing to fit without sexual stimulation when she globs lube on it and shoves it in. I yip at the invasion of icy plastic invading my flaccid girl parts, and then concentrate on the screen to take my mind off the discomfort.

After ten minutes of searching, the wand stretching my vagina in ways I never imagined possible, the technician seems about ready to give up. Suddenly, she extracts the wand, eliciting another yip, and whirls around to face me with a big smile on her face. “Ready?” she asks.

“Hell yeah,” I say, relieved the damn thing is finally out of me. The technician turns the monitor of her computer to face me, and draws an arrow on the image frozen on the screen, and types, “It's a boy!”

I squint at the screen, and then laugh when the jumble of swirls and blobs orients itself into a clear image of my son's erect penis and prominent testicles.

“Do you have a name?” The technician asks.

Without hesitation, I say, “Aiden.” She types his name to label the files, and tells me to get dressed while she leaves to print off the images and burn the video and pictures to a CD for me. I thank her for the keepsakes, and drive home with a huge smile on my face.

My baby has a penis and a name, and as I drive home, I imagine all sorts of snarky comebacks to deliver to anyone who even brings up the concept of circumcision, or as I prefer to call it, male genital mutilation.

OCTOBER

I'm sitting across from Cordelia at the kitchen table, watching a dance competition on the television with her. Alexandria is at her other grandmother's house, and Ranger is playing his stupid game.

I spend the commercial breaks whining to Cordelia about my newly developed pregnancy symptoms. My lower back and my feet ache. My fingers feel like water balloons even though my skin is dry and itchy. I'm tired, but I can't sleep. My uterus is squishing my stomach and my lungs, so I have major heartburn, and I pant instead of breathing normally. This morning, I made the mistake of taking my dietary supplements on an empty stomach, and then I started burping fish oil and throwing up in my mouth fifteen minutes later.

On the bright side, I can feel my son squirming, hiccupping, and performing amazing acrobatic feats.

Cordelia laughs at me. "It won't be long before he's squirming in your arms instead of your tummy," she says. "In just a few short months, you'll be changing diapers and cleaning up vomit."

"Oh joy!" I say, rolling my eyes, and turning my attention to the television. Another commercial comes on. "I had no idea how painful pregnancy could be. Nobody said anything about the stabbing, throbbing boob pains I've been having for two months, or what it feels like to be kicked in the top end of the vagina."

Cordelia sighs, and flips through a quilting magazine.

"And while I'm whining, let me just say that I wish I looked more pregnant and less obese. My belly used to have two distinct rolls. The top one was mostly flat, and the bottom one

was noticeably bigger. Now, my uterus is shoving the top roll up and out, while my lower roll is only protruding a little bit. Now the top roll appears twice as big as the bottom one.” I poke my belly in disgust.

Cordelia rolls her eyes, which makes her appear about twenty years younger. “You've also gained thirty pounds in the last six months, but I'm sure that has nothing to do with it.”

I wince. Cordelia is a few inches taller than me, and probably a size ten, maybe even an eight. She's complained to me about Ranger's weight many times, saying she doesn't understand why he won't get off his butt and exercise, or eat less. This is the first time she's criticized my weight. Perhaps that means she's starting to think of me as a daughter. Or maybe she's just a skinny bitch.

Swallowing both unreleased tears and a wave of anger, I say, “Well, my blood volume has doubled, and there's a baby and placenta and amniotic fluid, so I've probably only gained, like, ten pounds of fat. Maybe.” I frown, poking my tummy again. “Or maybe I should lay off the Big Macs,” I say with a sigh.

Cordelia snorts, and turns her attention back to the dance contest.

I drum my fingers on the cover of my new copy of *Spiritual Midwifery*, by Ina May Gaskin. I've been reading the few dozen birth stories in the first half of the book over and over. They have replaced the paranormal romances as my favorite form of entertainment. I love the hippie language and culture, the simplicity and beauty of the stories, and I want my birth to be just as holy, just as groovy.

Every day, when I play with Alexandria, who will be eighteen-months-old in a couple of weeks, I find myself fantasizing about holding Aiden in my arms, nursing him, playing with him,

watching him grow up. It's difficult for me to picture him as a five year old. My pulse starts racing when I try to imagine him as a teenager, and the memory of what Junior was like at that age pops into my head.

“I think I'm afraid of having to raise a boy because of my little brother,” I say, during the next commercial break.

“What's wrong with your little brother?” Cordelia asks.

“He's been in trouble since he hit puberty,” I say. “I can't even imagine my son at puberty. I'm afraid he'll get into drugs, or crime, or street-racing, or some other stupid life-threatening thing, like his uncle did.”

“Your brother is a drug dealer?” Cordelia asks.

“No, no, no,” I say, and then pause. “Well, I don't think he is. But that's not what worries me right now. He's just such a dumb-ass about some things. Last week, his twenty-two-year-old friend died in a motorcycle accident. He was racing, and hit the back of a truck. And yesterday, my brother updated his MySpace page with links to videos that glorify racing. He won't return my emails or calls, but Rose lectured him and made him promise not to get a motorcycle. As if she could stop him with a lecture.”

Cordelia shakes her head and turns off the television. “I've got a date with John tonight,” she says. John is her boyfriend of four years that she won't marry because she likes having her own house, and her last marriage was to a very controlling, emotionally abusive man. She actually said that spending twenty years married to a man who treated her like she was worthless was worth it because now she has her own house and enough money to live well.

“Have fun,” I say, waving at her back, as she walks out of the kitchen. Then, I lean back in my chair, overcome by the realization that I'm not afraid of my son turning out like my brother; I'm afraid that I will turn out to be abusive like my mother.

My brother was thirteen when Dad hired me to home-school him. Junior had been expelled from two schools, and wanted to drop out even though he was only in the eighth grade. He seemed determined to be the opposite of me. While I loved to read, I couldn't pay my brother to open a book. I loved math; he didn't think he needed to know anything more advanced than how to count money. I loved to learn; he loved to play video games and smoke pot.

I was nineteen, and had quit my retail job at a seasonal store in the local mall called Egyptian Treasures a month prior. Dad was disgusted that I quit after only working a couple of months. I didn't tell him the real reason that I quit, that I'd suffered three separate rapes from three separate coworkers on three separate occasions.

At the time, I thought the rapes were my fault. A twenty-four-year-old man raped me, on our first date, on a dock in a nearby park that I used to love, and instead of getting angry with him, I worried about him being deported back to Egypt over a possible cultural misunderstanding. Sure, I said no, I told myself. Sure, I struggled to get away, but I knew he was from a place where good girls didn't go anywhere with men without a chaperone, and I should have known better.

I also blamed myself for the next rape, a month later, because I was stupid enough to follow a balding, thirty-year-old Arab coworker into his apartment after work, where he raped me on the floor beside his bed. The man talked about marrying me afterward, and again, I chalked the whole situation to another cultural misunderstanding. I was an anthropology student,

I told myself, and I should have understood Arab culture well enough to understand that a woman should not enter a bachelor pad without a chaperone. Hell, I should have known better after what happened on the dock.

Then, the third rape happened within hours of the second, committed by a roommate of my two rapist coworkers, who happened to be a student at the University of Central Florida, as was I. He found me researching Muslim culture in the University's library, at midnight, in a place I often chose to study because there were no other people around. He forced me on the floor below a window, between the wall and a desk. Afterward, while I shook and silently cried, slumped against the wall, he told me he looked forward to seeing me again.

I didn't leave my apartment for a week after that night. It took all of my courage to get into my beige Toyota Corolla and park at the mall, in front of the store where two of my rapists worked and the third often studied. I was shaking so violently, I couldn't get out of the car at first. I couldn't breathe. I clung to the steering wheel, tears streaming down my face.

I arrived a few moments before the owner of the store did, and when I saw him get out of his black SUV, I stumbled over to him, and gave him the key to the store. I mumbled something about needing to quit because my grades were dropping, and hurried back to the safety of my car, never making eye contact. It was two years before I had the courage to visit that mall again, and six years before I could do so without having an anxiety attack in the parking lot.

I knew that I should have gone to the police, but I was afraid to testify in court. I remembered talking to my older half-sister when I was fifteen. She told me how humiliated she felt when she had to testify against our father, Roger, for trying to rape her when she was seventeen, how the prosecutors accused her of lying, and then accused her of trying to seduce her

own father. Though she was in her thirties, and a mother of two, when she told me about that trial, her voice shook and she couldn't help but cry. Roger was acquitted, and released out into the world, where he seduced and married my eighteen-year-old mother, free to rape and abuse her to his heart's content.

I hated myself for my cowardice, for letting three men get away with rape, for allowing three men the opportunity to do to other girls what they'd done to me. I didn't know how to cope, how to even begin healing. I wondered how my mother could go home every night for four years to a man who raped and beat her some days, and bought her gifts and treated her lovingly on others. I wondered if she had felt the same sense of resigned helplessness that I had felt as a child, having to come home every day to a mother who was as likely to beat me as she was to hug me. I wondered if she'd felt that she must deserve it, because she was too stupid, or too cowardly, to get away.

In that damaged state of mind, I accepted the responsibility of teaching my willful, lazy, thirteen-year-old brother how to pass the eighth grade, having no idea just how volatile I really was. I tried to be patient with him, but every time he admitted that he hadn't bothered reading an assignment or doing the homework, it was like he was kicking away a pillar from beneath the platform that held me to sanity, and I didn't know how to put the pillars back.

In the middle of the spring semester, my brother kicked away one pillar too many. I felt like all of the frustration, pain, and anger that had been building inside me since the rapes six weeks prior, on top of the residual pain from the abuse I'd suffered at the hands of my mother, had coalesced into a teeth-gnashing, venom-spraying, flesh-rendering monster, and that the monster had taken control of my body while I watched helplessly from outside of myself.

I screamed at my brother, sounding just like my mother had when she screamed at me. Junior ran away from me, into his bedroom, but I followed him, screaming through the door, punching and kicking it, demanding he tell me why he hated me, telling him to fuck himself, that I hated him, that since he hated me so much, I was going to kill myself, demanding to know if my death would make him happy. With a final punch of the door, I went into the kitchen, pulled a steak knife from the knife block, and started slicing the pale skin of my inner forearm, just above my left wrist.

My brother followed me into the kitchen, calling my name and telling me to stop, but I was so far gone into haze of pain, I barely registered the sound of his voice. He tried to take the knife from me, but I screamed at him, that I hated him, that I hated myself, and I ran away from him, barely managing to slip into the driver seat of my car and lock the door before he was there, banging on the window, screaming that he was going to call 911. I flipped him off, and drove away. A moment later, Dad called my cell phone and told me to stop being childish. I hung up on him, for the first time in my life. Tossing my phone into the passenger seat, sobbing so hard I could barely see the road. I found a secluded place to park, and continued cutting my arms one scratch at a time until both of my inner forearms looked like I'd slid down asphalt.

It was like a macabre meditation, horrifying and yet calming. When I finally regained some semblance of control over myself, I started the car up again, and drove without knowing where I was going. I couldn't face my brother, or my dad, and I was afraid of what I might do if I went home, so I ended up at Dolphin's house.

Dolphin lived with her mother and grandmother, who soothed me and cleaned my self-inflicted wounds until Dolphin got home from work. I'll never forget the look on her face when

she saw what I'd done, the rapid shift from shock, to horror, to grief, and then the familiar fierce, protective love.

Dad didn't know how to help me, nor did he understand how damaged I truly was, but Dolphin knew how to reach me, speaking in a soothing tone as she led me to her couch and turned the television to a station that she knew would be playing Pokémon. When the episode ended, we played the Pokémon game on her Nintendo sixty-four game system, until I was laughing again.

After that day, Dolphin instinctively knew when I was sliding down the depressive spiral. I would stop taking calls, avoid going online, barely leave my bed, much less my apartment, and she would just show up with snacks and drinks and play Pokémon on the computer with me for hours.

It hurts me to think about all of this, to realize what I put my brother through – he was only thirteen! And what I put my best friend through...I wonder if they both felt as helpless and scared as I did. Maybe that was the point. Maybe I unconsciously made them feel what I was feeling because I had to express those emotions, get them out, before they destroyed me.

If I'm right about that, then, unless I experience something equally shattering after my son is born, I should be able to control my temper around him. Then, there is hope for me and for my son, hope that I can break the cycle of violence that has plagued my family for at least three generations, if I can just repair the damage to my mind and heart before I bring my son into the world.

“I just need to heal nearly three decades of damage to my mind and heart,” I say to myself. “In about three months, give or take one. Oh, that sounds *totally* doable.”

I decide that some therapeutic shopping is in order. I use the table to help me stand, then I grab my purse and tell Ranger that I'm off to Lane Bryant.

The temperature has been dropping for the last few days, and soon we'll have the fifty degree weather that I have always loved. Of course, my jacket no longer zips over my expanding belly. Fortunately, Lane Bryant is going out of business, and there are huge discounts and tons of clothes at the high end of their size range. I spend \$70, and load the trunk of my car with ten outfits as well as a huge black coat with a water resistant windbreaker material on the outside and a warm fleece lining.

Just after I close my trunk, Ranger calls me. "I love you," he says.

"I love you too," I say, and wait for him to tell me why he called. When the silence feels unbearably awkward, I ask, "So...what do you need?"

"I don't need anything," he says.

"Okay," I say. "Um, you've never called me without a reason before."

"I know," he says. "I suck. I was just sitting here, instant messaging with a friend, when I realized that I don't pay any attention to you. I've pretty much totally ignored you for weeks, but you're still here. And then I realized, 'Man, I really love her!' And I had to call you right away, so I could tell you."

"Oh," I say, wondering if he's been drinking. "That's sweet. Well, I'll be home shortly."

"Okay, and then I'm going to take you out to dinner, and we can spend some quality time together," he says.

I smile. "Sounds like a plan."

It only takes fifteen minutes to get home, barely long enough to think. On one hand, he loves me, so there's hope for a long term future. On the other hand, he loves me because I haven't left him.

Before we leave for dinner, Ranger walks up to me with his hands behind his back. I pick his left hand, in which he holds a small wooden box with "The Lord of the Rings" painted in gold. I open the hinged box to find a replica of Arwen's Star, the necklace she gives Aragorn that represents her love for him and her willingness to sacrifice her immortality in order to spend just one lifetime with him.

Ranger smiles as I lift the necklace from the box with a small gasp, holding the glittering crystals to the light. "I've had that for six years," he says. "But I never found anyone special enough to give it to. Until now."

I bite my lip and take a deep breath, trying not to cry, but tears still spill down my cheeks. "It's beautiful," I say. No one other than Dad has ever given me jewelry before. "Thank you."

He takes the necklace from my hand and fastens it around my neck, then kisses me. Warmth spreads from my heart throughout my body, radiating from my fingertips as I run my fingers through Ranger's shaggy brown hair, the weight of the cool silver on my chest feeling like a promise.

A few days before Halloween, Cordelia finally presents me with a key to the house, and informs me that my portion of the rent will be \$150. I don't know what prompted her, but I suspect Ranger talked to her before I woke, and convinced her to make my living status official.

I'm excited to tell Kelli the address, now that I finally have a home for my home birth. At my prenatal visit, the scale shows that I am still gaining weight, which is not surprising, since Ranger and I eat out for every meal, and I tend to crave hamburgers at three in the morning. My urine tests boringly normal, and my blood pressure and the baby's heart rate are both exactly where they need to be.

Kelli and I finish our hour together discussing where we might put the birthing tub, when the time comes, and as I leave her office, I thank the Universe for Kelli's existence, and wish her all the best life has to offer.

I get home to find that Ranger spent the day rearranging the entire living room to set up a little desk for me in the corner for writing and making crafts, and he moved his desk and office stuff out of our bedroom to make room for Aiden's changing table and co-sleeper crib. That's a lot of work and a short turn around time, just to make me happy!

Ranger has not played his game in days. He told me that after he realized how much he'd been neglecting me, he finally understood that the game was taking up too much of his life, and promised to spend the time he's not working on a project for a client with me instead of with his buxom red-headed ranger character.

I would be amused if he dressed up like his game character for Halloween. I'm going to be a witch, as usual. I already bought my pointy black and violet hat, which I'll wear with my violet full skirt, and my black lace peasant blouse.

Halloween has always been my favorite holiday, so I was thrilled when, in my earliest studies of Paganism, I learned that Halloween was one of the most sacred days. Most Pagans call Halloween Samhain, pronounced "sow - when," from the ancient Celtic celebration of the

New Year. It's considered a day when the veil between the material world and the spiritual world is most thin, making it a great time to perform divination with tarot or other oracles. It's also a time when we honor and remember our deceased loved ones, and other ancestors.

In the very first Pagan ritual I ever performed, five years before I conceived my son, I freaked myself out by tapping into an ability in which, until that moment, I hadn't believed. It was the night of a full moon, and I was sitting in front of my vanity mirror. I stared into my own eyes by the light of a single white candle, and waited. I didn't know what was I was looking for; I only knew that I was supposed to be trying to contact my spirit guide, or guardian angel.

I found it difficult to stare into my own eyes at first, as I rarely made eye contact with anyone, and I didn't like my reflection – too fat, too ugly. But finally, I managed it, and a moment later, I watched my face morph into that of a familiar stranger. She had bright red curls and vibrant green eyes, radiant white skin, and an expression of exasperated frustration. I heard her exclaim in my head, “It's about time,” and I felt my mouth fall open in shock. I couldn't remember ever having seen her before, but I had a feeling that I'd known her deep in my past, and that if I just thought long enough, I'd remember.

Then, the red curls straightened into a long black mane, her complexion darkening into a deep red-brown, her pointed jaw becoming square, high cheekbones even more pronounced, nose widening and lengthening, eyes darkening to brown and I found myself staring into the eyes of a middle-aged Native American man. He blinked at me, and transformed into a blond Viking warrior, who grinned at me before shifting into a bald African woman.

Every face was familiar, yet not, every being staring into my eyes, communicating without words the same message over and over, “It's about time!” Over the years that followed,

as I studied reincarnation and past life memories, I would come to believe that the people I saw in the mirror had been members of my family in past lives. Working with my spirit boards, my personal dream journal, and participation in past-life regression meditations at Pagan gatherings, I would determine that the red-haired woman was Alyana, my sister in a Celtic lifetime. The Native American was Wunjao, a husband. The Viking had been my brother in an even earlier lifetime, and the African woman had been my grandmother in an even earlier one.

I saw at least a dozen faces in the mirror that first night, but the last two faces were more than I felt ready to handle. At first I thought my own reflection was returning, until I saw the wrinkles and close-cropped, permed gray hair. My beloved paternal Grandma looked sadly at me as tears ran down my cheeks. Only a few months had passed since her death. Before that shock could fade, her face morphed slightly into the face of her son – my biological father, Roger.

I recognized him from the pictures Grandma had given me after Mom's funeral. "Your Daddy sure did love you girls," Grandma would tell Rose and me, every time we saw her. Rose and I would look at each other uncomfortably, knowing that Rose wasn't Roger's daughter, too young to understand that regardless of whose sperm got Rose started in Mom's womb, Roger had loved us both.

At twenty-two, I had not yet come to terms with how I felt about what my father had done to my mother. I didn't think about how the violence that I couldn't remember witnessing might be affecting my life and my relationships. I didn't realize that I had any feelings at all towards my long-deceased father until I saw him staring back at me through my mirror.

Looking into Roger's eyes disturbed me more than I could express even to myself that night. I nearly fell off my chair in my hurry to get away from the mirror, quickly blowing out the candle, grabbing my keys, and rushing into the warm night. I did not want to think about my father, about what he had done to me, or to my mother, or what he might have done had he not had a heart attack when I was five. After a good night's rest, the memory of my first ritual seemed less powerful, and within a few days, I dismissed what I'd seen as the beginnings of a dream, that turned into a nightmare and then startled me awake. Never mind that it was only 8:00 p.m., and that I hadn't been sleepy.

Two years later, I took a class on mediumship, the art of communicating with the dead. In the last class, we had a séance with table tipping. One of our classmates, Dennis, brought in a beautiful maple table, with three-legs and a circular top about three feet in diameter. He showed us the bottom of it, as he customarily did for his clients. Everyone in the room had experience with the supernatural, though of the eight of us, only Dennis has practiced table tipping before.

Our teacher lowered the lights and lit a candle, encouraging us to silently call out to the loved ones that we hoped to speak with that night. I silently but passionately begged my mother to talk to me through the table, even if only to say, "Hi."

We all sat around the table, resting our fingers lightly on the top, and Dennis led us through songs to help raise energy that spirit could use to make the table rock. The song that finally got the table tipping from side to side was "Doe, a deer," from *The Sound of Music*. We sang the chorus to that song a dozen times, until the table had us running in circles, trying to keep our fingers on it. When we were all laughing and breathing too hard to sing, the table

settled back into rocking, and then waiting, vibrating, while we all brought our chairs up to sit around it again.

Dennis started the séance by asking if there were any beings who wished to speak with any of us that night. He told the table to rock once for no, twice for yes. The table tilted twice into the lap of a woman sitting next to him, so she took her turn asking the table yes or no questions until she knew who was speaking to her, and what they wanted to say.

Dennis facilitated by asking Spirit if any being was present that wanted to speak with the next person. When he came to me, the table only rocked once. I was silently devastated, but sucked it up. After the last person got to use the table, Dennis, asked if there were any final messages. The table leaned into my lap twice.

“Looks like you get a message after all,” Dennis said, smiling encouragingly at me.

“Are you a woman?” I asked. The table rocked once. I was silent for a long moment, trying to think of a passed loved one that was male.

“Are you a spirit guide?” I asked, confusion evident in the pitch of my voice.

The table tipped once, and settled back with an indignant thud, as if the spirit was annoyed that I didn't know who he was right off the bat.

Suddenly, my father's face appeared in my head, and my voice trembled as I asked, “Roger?”

The table enthusiastically tipped twice.

I sat there shocked and overwhelmed, fighting tears. I didn't know how I should feel. Dennis nodded at me, reminding me to ask something only the spirit would know, to make

certain he was who he said he was. Silently, I asked if he was the man who shot my mother in the back of the neck.

The table tipped once, then twice, slowly, gently.

I burst into tears, burying my face in my hands.

The table pressed itself into my lap, as if giving me a hug, though the only fingers remaining on it were those of the four people sitting furthest from me, a couple of them having to stand to keep their fingers on top of it. The three sitting closest to me had their hands on my shoulders and back, comforting.

When I could talk again, the table told me that Roger loved me and was always watching over me. I asked if I could talk to Mom, but the table said no.

I left that class emotionally drained, disappointed and feeling abandoned because my mother hadn't come through, and confused but grateful that Roger had.

The table also told me that night that Mom had forgiven Roger, and that they were friends now that they were dead. The thought comforted me. It confirmed an idea that had been growing in my mind ever since Mom died, that in death she would not be the volatile being she was in life. I theorized that the pain and disfigurements of her life would be left behind with her body, leaving her soul pure and free. And if the same was true of Roger, then there was no reason for them to harbor hatred for each other in the afterlife.

Reflecting on that night, as I pass out fun size Snickers bars to children on Halloween, I begin to believe that I really can heal myself before my baby is born. If my mother and father could forgive each other after death, surely I could forgive them both. If I could forgive my father for molesting me, beating, raping, and ultimately murdering my mother; and if I could

forgive my mother for beating me when she should have comforted me, and for convincing me that I was worthless when she should have shown me that I was precious to her, then I could forgive anyone anything.

Even myself.

NOVEMBER

At a Pagan Gathering celebrating Samhain, the weekend following the actual holiday, a friend read his tarot cards for me. I asked if Ranger would propose to me, and the cards indicated that he would, soon, during a time of movement, and that the way he asked would take my breath away.

I've been home for two days now. Ranger just woke me from a nap because I have an appointment to get a blood glucose test. I was dreaming that Ranger and I were in the kitchen. He was making stir fry on the stove, and I was sitting at the table, eating rice and feeding cookies to Alexandria at the table. Staring intently into his wok, Ranger asked me, "If I were to ask you to marry me, what would you say?"

I choked on my rice, and then said, "What?"

Almost before I finished saying the word, Ranger said, "Never mind!"

I woke up thinking, "Dammit, I should have said something else!"

Ranger laughs when I tell him about the dream and says, "That's funny! I've been thinking about asking you since you left for the Pagan gathering."

I wait, but he doesn't say anything else about it, and then I have to leave for my appointment.

In the last few months, I've tried to imagine being a single working mother, putting my baby in daycare and pumping milk for him, but the thought of living like that hurts too much. Sometimes I think I'd rather give him up for adoption to a family that can actually spend time

with him in his first few years of life, than have busy daycare workers leaving him to cry until they have a chance to take care of his needs, barely getting to see the child I'm working my butt off to support. That would be too much like my childhood after Mom died, when I rarely saw Dad, and when I did he was stressed out and not in the least bit comforting or nurturing.

Before Mom died, she was a stay at home mom. Even though I didn't always feel safe with her unpredictable temper, I did know she would always be there. In the mornings before school, she had my lunch ready, and if I were running late, she would drive me, lecturing the whole way on the importance of being punctual. If I got sick at school, she'd be there to pick me up, bundle me up in a king size quilt on the couch and popping in a VHS movie for me to watch if there was nothing interesting on the television. I could count on her to serve me chicken noodle soup and glass after glass of orange juice, to smooth my hair from my forehead with cold hands as she felt my face for fever.

I grew up feeling that it was normal for a mother to be at home, and no amount of education on the women's rights movement, or seeing working mother characters on popular television shows, could replace my conviction that a kid needed her mom at home.

After Mom died, I tried to take her place for my sister and brother. Even at twelve, I preferred to push my own pain away and try to make others feel better. I told them to treat each other with love, to stop stealing from each other and Dad, to do their best at school, and to stay away from drugs and alcohol. I was confident that if they did what I said, they'd grow up to be happy and healthy.

Of course, they did the opposite of everything I said, told me I was not their mother, picked fights with me, and left me feeling like I was failing them. In my frustration, lacking

maturity, I would hit back, throw things, scream, even steal from them, rationalizing that I was just giving them a taste of their own medicine.

I did well in school because it was the only way I earned praise. I avoided drugs and alcohol because I knew that Roger had abused both, and I didn't want to be anything like him. However, my sister and brother grew into teenagers who stole, drank, experimented with drugs, and did poorly in school. I felt that I'd failed them, but I also felt that if I really had been their mother, they would have been totally different people. I thought that the abuse and neglect we had all suffered, and Dad's inconsistent discipline, were the reasons my sister and brother did not grow up to be happy, productive young adults, and I wanted the opportunity to have kids of my own, to raise the way I thought of as natural and right, to remind this crazy, violent world how it should be done.

I would stay at home with my kids and teach them how I wanted them to behave rather than punishing them for misbehavior. I would feed my kids nutritious foods cooked from scratch, rather than processed sugary crap from a box. I would share my love of reading and learning with my kids from the day they were born, and learn and grow with them at home rather than sending them to be institutionalized in public schools.

Unfortunately, my peers, my family and even Ranger and Cordelia, all think that I should work outside the home. When I try to quantify the work that a stay at home mom performs in terms of the costs of childcare and maid services, they take my total and subtract the amount of money I could be making with full time work, making it seem like my desire to stay at home is harmful to my family and simply selfish. I can't quantify the value of raising my own child

rather than leaving child care workers and teachers to do it. I can't attach a price to my own happiness or peace of mind, and then claim it outweighs the benefits of a second income.

Screw it. If my mother could teach herself to walk and talk all over again, and win back custody of her daughters after coming back from the dead, I sure as hell can live by my ideals. I *will* raise my child myself, and earn money from home. I don't know how yet, but I will.

In the two days following my dream of a proposal, Ranger has said absolutely nothing about it. I keep wondering if I should say something, but I have a feeling that he's trying to plan something romantic, and who am I to get in the way of unsolicited romance?

After sunset, Ranger drives us to TGI Friday's for dinner, celebrating the big paycheck he received Wednesday. While we wait for food, he makes art out of the straw wrapper and napkin ring, as he does every time we go out to eat, apparently in an attempt to stave off boredom.

Tonight, he first makes a ring with a spire in place of a stone, and hands it to me. I hold it up and ask, "Is it a ring?"

He laughs and says, "Turn it over. It's a noose!"

Ha bloody ha.

Then he makes a band out of his napkin ring and slides it on my finger. It fits. Oh boy!

I put it on his finger, but it doesn't fit. He says all of nothing. I slump into my chair.

After we get home, during an intimate moment, he finally proposes. Afterwards, he tells me that he'd been trying to come up with a creative way of asking for weeks, but gave up.

I tell him, in the driest voice I can muster, that I look forward to telling our future children our proposal story.

Ranger, Alpheus, and I sit on Cordelia's patio as the sun sets. The crickets and frogs sing so loudly, I have to concentrate to figure out what the two men are saying. I love the chill of the fall evening, and having the opportunity to wear my huge black coat that I got for \$20 at Lane Bryant last month. It's fleece on the inside, keeping me warm and comfortable, and polyester on the outside, the water-resistant material of a windbreaker, perfect for cold drizzle and defending against wind-chill. Moreover, it's so big I can zip it up around Alexandria when she's in my lap.

"I got it, man," Ranger exclaims, face flushed, slapping a knee with one hand as his other hand cradles a whiskey sour. "Dude, you could be Meatwad at our wedding!"

Meatwad is a giant meatball from Ranger's favorite Adult Swim cartoon, "Aqua Teen Hunger Force." Alpheus laughs so hard, he sounds like he's sobbing.

I close my eyes and lean back in the wicker love seat with a sigh, imagining the wedding pictures, and someday showing them to my son. "And that's Uncle Alpheus," I'd say. "Yes, he is wearing a suit of raw hamburger. You have your step-daddy to thank for that. Now, ask me how he proposed! That's another great story..."

I can't remember Mom telling me either of her proposal stories. I don't want to ask Allen how he proposed, because he hates to talk about Mom. But I can see Roger proposing the same way Ranger did me.

Actually, Ranger and Roger have a little too much in common. For one thing, Ranger's father was also named Roger, and was also misogynistic and abusive. While I've never seen Ranger be violent towards anyone, and I've never even heard him raise his voice, he seems to have inherited his father's sexism. I can see it in the way he dismisses his mother, talking down

to her, confident that no matter how rude or obnoxious he is, she won't kick him out. He also tends to talk about women in terms of what he'd like to do with their racks. When I confront him about it, he says he's just joking, and then he's more affectionate than usual for a couple of days, as if trying to make me feel more secure in his feelings for me so I don't reconsider our engagement.

Ranger and Roger are also similar in body shape, though Ranger is nearly a foot taller than Roger, and probably fifty pounds heavier. Ranger drinks a lot, and smokes weed, just like Roger did. But I don't think Ranger manipulates me the way that Roger manipulated my mother. Although, I suppose if he is really good at it, I wouldn't know.

I don't like the way Ranger ignores me in favor of playing his game or watching TV with Alpheus, or the way he talks about women as if they were sex toys. In bed, I often feel like a sex toy. During the day, I often feel like Ranger barely notices I'm there, but once we're in bed, he can't keep his hands off of me. My breasts have been super tender for months, but he messes with them every night, despite my protests. I've shoved him away, twisted his own nipples, even slapped him, but he just laughs and acts like he thinks he's being playful.

It bothers me that I've given up, and let him mess with my "rack" every night, even though I hate it. Sometimes it seems that sexual attention is the only attention I get from him, but I need the affection. I feel so cut off right now, because I don't know anyone who can possibly relate to what I'm going through. I don't know anyone who has had an unplanned pregnancy, or started a relationship while pregnant with another man's baby. I feel like I have to make things work with Ranger because I don't have anywhere else to go. And it's not like he's beating me.

Still, my life feels like a pale echo of my mother's. She gave her personal power over to Roger, and suffered for it, especially after I was born. I hate to even imagine that I might do the same, with my own baby on the way. If Ranger hit me, I'd be out the door before he could blink – that is, if I didn't beat him to a bloody pulp first. Even if he directly insulted me, raised his voice, called me a name, I would go. But he doesn't do any of those things, and I don't want to give up what could be a good thing, especially since I can't tell whether I'm just being over sensitive due to crazy hormonal moodiness.

Some days I feel depressed and frustrated and consider calling off the engagement and figuring out a new living situation; other days, I feel totally in love with Ranger, and can't wait to marry him. He seems to be really excited about the wedding, bringing it up during meals, between TV shows, and even in bed. It seems like Ranger and I have discussed wedding plans almost non-stop from the moment I accepted his proposal.

Ranger is an Atheist, and I am Pagan, so we won't be marrying in a church. Nor will we marry in the Clerk of Courts, like I did in my first marriage. We have a friend who is a notary. That works for us. Since he proposed on the thirteenth, and since my favorite holiday is Halloween, and since he loves Renaissance fairs, we agreed to pick a Friday the Thirteenth to marry, and to make it a costume wedding. I'll lose lots of weight and dress like a fairy princess, and he says he wants to lose weight too, and dress like a privateer. Alexandria can wear a Snow White costume, and little Aiden can be a knight. We can have witches and vampires and Shakespeares and DaVincis all in our wedding party.

We take a break from wedding talk so Ranger and Alpheus can smoke. I stand on the patio, a few feet away from them, trying not to inhale the smoke streaming from their Djarum

Blacks, unable to hear their conversation over the nocturnal creature symphony streaming from the other side of the patio screen. Instead, I stare at the waxing moon as I sip a cup of hot herbal tea, musing that it would be wonderful to be married at night in a floral garden, or on the beach, beneath a full moon. I've already mentioned this fantasy to Ranger, but he said he'd rather marry indoors so we don't have to worry about bugs or rain.

Mom and Allen had a Christian wedding when I was six. I don't remember anything about it, but I have pictures of Mom in her wedding dress, Meemaw in a dark blue dress with a half-skirt and puffy short sleeves, and Dad in his Air Force Uniform.

I was ten when they decided to renew their vows with a Buddhist wedding. At the last moment, one of their friends who had a part in the ceremony called to say she couldn't make it, so they asked me to take on her role, and their friend hurriedly told me what I was supposed to do over the phone.

Mom and Dad smiled indulgently at me when my turn in the ceremony came up. I was to serve them Saki in a certain way, alternating the number of sips between them. I tried very hard to remember exactly what I was told, but I'm pretty sure I gave them far more Saki than required for the ceremony. No one minded, but there was a lot more laughter afterward.

I already told Ranger I want a real honeymoon, at least two weeks of just the two of us immediately following the ceremony, which means I want to wait until my son is at least two, and then see if I feel comfortable being away from him for that long. But it would also be wonderful to wait until Aiden is four and Alexandria is six, so they are both old enough to participate in the ceremony, and hopefully remember it.

My mother gave up her name when she married Roger, and then took Allen's name when she married him. I used to think that I would take my husband's name because it would unify the family. But now I intend to keep my last name. I like Curran, because it starts with a C, which made me one of the first in line at school, and it means "hero." And I'm going to give my son my last name, because his father hasn't so much as responded to my emails for the last two months, and I'd rather my son had his name in common with the parent he'll most definitely know.

I'm thinking that if Alexandria is going to be my baby's sister, then I will make his middle name Alexander. That way, when they get older, they will have a name in common, even though it won't be the surname. Aiden means fiery, Alexander means warrior, more or less, so my son's full name would mean "fiery warrior hero." Very masculine. I approve.

My musings are interrupted by my cell phone's ringtone, the techno pop version of Bryan Adam's *Heaven*. It's Pan, calling me for the first time since June or July. The last email he sent me was two months ago, and he never responded to the sonogram pictures I sent nearly seven weeks ago.

He tells me that was laid off six weeks ago, and that he has neither applied for unemployment nor applied for any jobs in the last six weeks. His water heater broke, so he's been taking showers at the gym because he has no income to fix or replace the water heater.

I try to sound sympathetic, but can tell by the wide-eyed expressions on Ranger's and Alpheus' faces that I am failing to hide my rising temper.

Pan tells me that he's still thinking about applying to teach English in Japan, which he was thinking about when I met him over a year ago. Thinking about applying. Hasn't applied.

And, six months later, he's still not sure if he wants to be a part of Aiden's life. To quote him directly, he says, "Sometimes I'm intrigued, sometimes I'm not."

I wanted to say, "You're 44 years old. Time to grow up!"

But, hoping I can get through to him by appealing from his child's perspective, I say, "Well, no matter what you end up doing with your life, this baby is coming. It might be a few years before he understands that his father didn't want him, but when he does, that's really going to suck for him."

"I don't know what I want," Pan says. "I'm still trying to figure out what I want to be, what I want to do with my life."

I sigh, exasperated, and then say, "Well, I hope you figure it out soon. Thank you for calling me. Keep in touch. Gotta go." I hang up without waiting for him to say goodbye.

Everyone I know is encouraging me to sue him for child support. The thing with child support is, if he's paying it, he has the right to see the child. There's really no part of me that wants him in Aiden's life at this point.

I don't know if every woman would be as angry about his ambivalence as I am, or if the fact that my own dad, who adopted me rather than contributing to my genetic material, has only spoken to me once in the last six months, despite the fact that he lives fifteen minutes down the road. Sometimes I want to ask him why he bothers referring to me as his daughter on his Facebook posts, when he can never be bothered to so much as click "like" on one of my status updates.

Then there's Ranger, who still avoids his daughter, though he has finally started making eye contact when he rocks her to sleep. I will never understand how a father, biological or

adopted, can be ambivalent about spending time with his own child.

I can't wrap my mind around the idea of not knowing whether you want a kid or not, when the kid already exists. It's one thing to be twenty, not expecting, and not know if you want to have kids. It's quite another thing to be any age and know a child is on the way, and not know whether you want this kid in your future.

I want to tell Pan, "You do, or you don't. You see yourself as a parent, or you see yourself as a sperm donor. Pick one, dammit!

I want to say, "Because if I pick for you, it's going to be sperm donor.

On a sunny mid-November afternoon, Dolphin hosts my baby shower at a mutual friend's house. In honor of my most prevalent craving, she serves a baked potato bar, with sour cream, butter, cheese, salsa, broccoli and cheddar soup, bacon, and onions for toppings. About ten friends attend, mostly high school friends, plus my sister and brother, Dolphin, Alpheus, Ranger, and I.

Dad lives five minutes away, but he's off doing something with his relatively new wife. I've seen so little of him since he started dating her that it's easy to forget that they've been married for four or five years now.

His absence hurts. As my only living parent, he should make an effort to communicate with me more often than once a year. On the other hand, he and I have nothing in common. I'm liberal; he's conservative. I believe people are more important than money; he believes money is what makes people important. I've been struggling to find peace, happiness even; his favorite pastime is to pick arguments, just because he likes to debate.

But Rose and Junior are here, so at least I'll have some family in the pictures for Aiden's baby book.

I start off the party by announcing my engagement, and showing off the ring that Ranger gave to me, a gold band with interlacing hearts framing a clear cubic zirconium. It had been his grandmother's engagement ring.

After everyone pays homage to my ring and offers congratulations, we design our ultimate baked potatoes and scarf them down. Then we play a version of charades with a baby and birth theme, which leads to hysterical poses and noises, as engineers and business professionals try to act out such alien phrases as “preparing baby food,” “washing cloth diapers,” and “discovering the condom broke.” I pull from the hat the easiest possible phrase for me to mime, which is good, because I suck at improvisational drama. I simply lie down on the floor, raise my legs in the air and spread them, then strain with a loud grunt. Every one shouts in unison, “Giving birth!”

I have no intention of giving birth in that position, of course. In all my reading, I've learned that gravity is a birthing woman's friend, and lying on your back means pushing uphill, putting the full weight of the baby and uterus on the spine and tailbone, causing pain and prolonging labor. I'd rather squat, thanks.

As the party winds down, Dolphin leads us in a procession to the front yard, where she stands me in the middle, surrounded by my loved ones as they take handfuls of blue and silver “It's a Boy” confetti.

“Okay,” Dolphin says. “We're going to throw this confetti at Ashley with our wishes for her and her baby. Who's first?”

“OH, ME! ME!” My brother shouts, throwing his handful, as if it were a baseball, directly at my head.

“Ow,” I say, shaking confetti from my hair. “Thanks.”

The rest of my friends and family wish me health, happiness, and love as they gently toss the confetti in the air above my head.

As blue and silver bits of metallic plastic sparkle in the late afternoon sun, I make my own wishes: that my son and I will have a painless and joyful birth experience; that I will be a loving, calm mother; that the Universe guide me to making the best possible decisions regarding mine and my son's health; and that I won't still be picking confetti out of my hair when I'm forty.

Three days later, I'm still finding confetti in random places all over my body, but especially along my scalp. I pull a piece from my hairline above my left eye as I sit in Kelli's office for my prenatal appointment, waiting for the assistant midwife, Kristie, to finish drawing blood for some test or other, standard procedure.

My baby is much more active than I expected he would be. Before I experienced pregnancy, I thought babies just occasionally kicked, and that it happened so rarely that it came as a joyful surprise every time. I was so wrong. Every time I roll over in bed, he kicks, squirms, and does a few somersaults for good measure.

I love feeling him move around. It's the best part of my day, every day.

While I sit in her office, feeling my baby dance inside my tummy, Kelli is backpacking across the mountains of New Zealand, taking a rare and well-deserved vacation. I would love to be there with her, though from the trouble I had walking around the flat park that hosted the

Pagan gathering at the beginning of this month, I doubt I would have been able to travel more than a mile per day.

I was fifteen the last time I went hiking in mountainous terrain, visiting Meemaw in Virginia. I told her I was going for a walk, and she told me to stay on the road, but I didn't listen. I just wanted to immerse myself in the woods for a little while, to have an adventure, so I gingerly made my way through a patch of briar, and stepped into the shade of trees older than my mother would have been.

I didn't go there to think about my mother, but how could I not remember that the last time I'd seen those trees, she had hiked beside me. I didn't want to think about my mother just then, because it still hurt too much to remember that I would never see her again. I tried to distract myself from her memory by focusing on the sound of rushing water.

I stepped carefully to the edge of the bank, looking down into the muddy river. Upstream I could see deep impressions in the clay and translated the hoof marks into a struggle of life and death between a family of deer and a raging torrent. I stepped a little closer to the edge, and fell through a tangle of weeds.

I was not expecting to be enveloped in cold water, fully clothed, looking up at a patch of sky through towering trees. It took me a moment to realize that I should stand. I laughed at myself as I stood thigh deep in the churning water, too short to reach the top of the bank. I waded downstream, and then walked on top of rocks jutting from the water, looking for a way out.

By the time I found a boulder stuck in the bank, I wished I had thought to bring food or at least potable water. I stepped from the rocks to an exposed root and used a low hanging branch

of oak to balance myself while my other hand searched for grips in the stony face. It took forever to scale the ten or so feet to the top of the bank. As I finally pulled myself over the top, I rested on my back watching June bugs zoom through the air. I didn't feel ready to return to the house just yet, but I needed dry clothes and sustenance. I thought it'd be faster if I cut through the forest instead of looking for the tractor trail, and I set off in the direction I felt Meemaw's house should be. Many hours later, I found it, and I was never again allowed to walk on my own in Virginia.

In Florida, I would never have felt able to hike so freely through the wilderness. Saw palmettos, with their sharp span of leaves and branches, form solid four-foot tall thickets that can go out in all directions for miles under the pine, oak, and palm trees of the southernmost mainland state. The woods behind the neighborhood in which I grew up, however, weren't wild enough to be impenetrable. By the bank of a retention lake, beneath the dangling branches of a willow tree, there was a circle of saw palmettos that I likened to a fairy ring. Sometimes I'd sit in it and read, feeling the circle would protect me. Once I went there to curl myself into fetal position and sob on the damp ground.

I was ten, hot and sweaty from a long day of playing in the woods with my friends. Mom was standing at our mustard-yellow stove, chopping vegetables with a butcher knife. I wanted to ride my bike to the store to get some beef jerky, but Mom said no.

"Why not?" I whined.

"Because I said so," she said, without missing a beat.

“That’s not a reason!” I stomped my foot, angry that Mom wouldn't let me go to the store to get my beef jerky, when earlier the same day she'd asked me to ride my bike to Hardees's to get her food her doctor and Dad said she wasn't supposed to eat.

“I said no!” Mom's shoulders tensed up, and the knife made a knocking noise on the plastic cutting board with every chop.

I felt the tingling on the back of my neck, that warning that Mom was shifting into monster mode. But I didn't care. I wanted beef jerky. “You let me go last time!” I shouted.

Mom whirled around, aiming the knife at my chest. “Goddammit, I said no!” she screamed. “When I say no, I mean no, you stupid bitch! Stupid fat ugly bitch! What the fuck is wrong with you? I'm the mother, not you! You do what I say!”

With every sentence she jabbed the knife toward me. I backed out of the kitchen as she crept toward me. When the tip of the knife pricked my chest, I turned and ran out the front door. I tripped over my bike, but didn't pause to check my skinned knee, because Mom was following me with the knife, still screaming, “Get your ass back in here! I'm talking to you, missy! Goddammit, I said – don't leave the fucking door open!”

I ran as fast as I could on my shaking legs, sobbing so hard I couldn't breathe. I knocked on my best friend's door. Her mother opened the door a crack, using her body to block my view of her living room. The last time I'd seen her, she'd caught me stealing two dollars from her coffee table. I hadn't been welcome in her house since. “What do you want?” she asked coldly.

I was sobbing so hard, I could barely speak. “My mom...attacked me...Please...help...”

“I'm sure you deserved it,” she snapped, closing the door.

“No!” I cried. I lifted my hand to knock again, but fell to my knees sobbing instead. “Please,” I whispered.

I got up and stumbled to the bank of the retention lake, beneath the boughs of a willow that cradled me in a maternal gesture of protection, and cried until I couldn't cry anymore.

The memory of that afternoon has haunted me for seventeen years now. In the terror of the moment, I truly believed that my mother would kill me if I didn't get away. I'll never know if she really meant to stab me, or if she was just using the knife as a prop, adding power to her already intimidating bully routine.

However, what *she* thought she was going to do has no relevance in terms of my life. I believed that my own mother, the woman who was supposed to love me unconditionally, wanted me dead in that moment. Instead of bruising my heart with a relatively gentle strike of screaming insults at me, my mother dealt a shattering blow. In my mind, my *mother* hated me. I must truly be all the things she claimed. Stupid. Fat. Ugly. Worthless. Unlovable.

Those assumptions were all emphasized by the callous disregard of my best friend's mother. The woman I am now would like to ask her what the hell she was thinking. A child knocked on her door, sobbing and begging for help, and did she try to calm the child down and find out what really happened? No, she shut the door in the child's face, but not before saying those disempowering words. *I'm sure you deserved it.* The only person that I trusted to help me told me that I deserved to be attacked.

Seven years later, a man raped me, and I told myself that it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been so stupid. Starting that year, I gained ten pounds a year, every year. I rarely bothered with make up or pretty clothes. I spent every cent I made on my friends, and always

put my own needs last. I gave myself to any man or woman who showed interest in me, and blamed myself when they dumped me weeks later.

Two years after the first rape, I suffered the same crime three more times, and each time I was sure that I deserved it.

Is my mother to blame for every bad thing that has happened to me throughout my life?

Of course not. As a child, the adults in my life were responsible for my well-being. But once I became an adult, it became my responsibility to find a way to heal myself. I knew there was something wrong with me, and I chose to wallow in misery rather than face my fears and seek help.

Now, I'm taking back my personal power. I accept that my happiness is my responsibility, just as I accept that my child's health and happiness will be my responsibilities until he comes of age.

As Ranger and I left Ruby Tuesday's the other night, where we'd had dinner with Dolphin, Aries, and Alpheus, I caught a glimpse of myself reflected in the dark window, and froze. I don't know how it happened, but all of a sudden, I finally looked pregnant. There was definitely a jumbo watermelon beneath my rolls of cushiness.

I'm glad my sister and brother will be joining us at our place tonight for Thanksgiving dinner. The four of us used to gather at Dad's for Thanksgiving, but since he remarried, we rarely see him anymore, even on holidays. Over the last few years, Rose has hosted our family dinners. I'm happy to give her a break, and to have the opportunity to play hostess.

I am thankful for my healthy pregnancy, my supportive and loving friends. I am thankful

for my fiancé, who just turned thirty yesterday and loved the card I made him, more of an illustrated pamphlet actually, with thirty paragraphs about why Ranger was wonderful. I'm grateful for living with him in a house where I can birth and raise my son. I give thanks for having enough to eat, for having a trusting and knowledgeable midwife, and for being so close to finally being a mother.

To quote the popular personal-development guru, Louise Hay, "I am blessed beyond my fondest dreams."

DECEMBER

At my December prenatal visit with Kelli, I stare at the scale. 333 pounds. It's unbelievable. I never thought I would ever weigh so much. I've gained fifty pounds in the last six months.

Kelli is very kind about it, but I feel overwhelmed with shame, before that numb feeling I always get when I have to see my body, or go clothes shopping, kicks in. I remember changing my clothes in a shower stall in high school, putting on a new shirt with the old shirt still around my neck so that even I wouldn't have to see how fat I was. I'm three times that size now.

I was so much smaller then. I just realized that I was only a size twelve the first time I was raped, and a size eighteen the second time. I never thought about it before, but now I wonder if I have gained ten pounds a year because I've been unconsciously trying to protect myself. Fat people are harder to kidnap; according to a popular bumper sticker. Maybe my subconscious thinks fat people are also harder to rape. Or that being fat would make me less desirable to rapists.

I sought therapy for a few months after I cut myself, at Dolphin's insistence, and in one session, my therapist suggested that I was fat because I was trying to hide myself. I was so afraid that if people could see who I truly was beneath and behind all the extra pounds, that they would still reject me, still judge me unworthy of love.

I eat for comfort, and usually go for chocolate, ice cream, cheese, and cookies when I'm stressed or depressed. Sometimes I eat to punish myself for being fat and ugly, by continuing to eat until my stomach hurts and even my esophagus is stuffed with food. I would probably be bulimic if I weren't so reluctant to vomit. I hate vomiting, though. It's terrifying for me to have

my throat full of bile, unable to breath, while my stomach takes on a life of it's own, bucking like a bull at a rodeo trying to shake off a persistent rider.

Perhaps another reason that I abuse myself with food is because my parents used food as a reward and deprivation as a punishment. When I pleased my parents by being quiet or getting good grades, I got a cookie. After screaming at me or beating me, Mom often gave me cake or ice cream as a way of apologizing. When I argued, or failed to do my chores, I was sent to bed without dinner. Instead of learning about how food fuels my body, I learned to use fuel to manipulate my emotions.

Even after I learned about nutrition in my physical anthropology classes in college, and how poor nutrition shortens the human lifespan, even leaving its mark on our bones, I still didn't love myself enough to make healthy food choices.

But I love my baby more than chocolate. I love him more than baked potatoes, more than pizza and ice cream, more than mountain dew, cheese, or cookies. I don't want him to have the same struggles with food and weight that I do, so I need to eat and drink the way I want him to, with frequent small meals packed with nutrition, and lots of water.

“The results of your blood sugar test came back,” Kelli says, while noting my weight on my chart. “It looks like you are prediabetic. We have to take care of this, now, or your son could gain too much weight before birth, and worse, once the umbilical cord is cut, his blood sugar level could suddenly drop dangerously low, sending him into seizures, a coma, or even killing him.”

I stare at Kelli in horror, my throat tightening and my arms instinctively wrapping around my tummy.

Kelli puts down the clipboard and looks me in the eyes. “If you can't keep your blood sugar levels below 140 throughout the day and below 100 when you first wake up, you'll become a level three risk, and I'll have to refer you to a hospital for your birth.”

I shake my head. “That's not going to happen. Tell me what's safe to eat. What should I avoid like the plague? Tell me what I need to do to make sure my son and I stay healthy.”

Kelli reaches into a drawer next her, then hands me a black zippered pouch. Inside, I find a blood sugar monitor, a device for pricking fingers, a vial of lancets for the pricker, and a vial of test strips for the monitor. “Use this every morning,” she says. “Before you eat or drink, test your basal blood sugar level, and write it down in a food journal. It should be below 100. If it's not, have dinner earlier, and don't have any evening snacks or sugary drinks, including milk or juice.”

I nod, writing down everything she says in a notebook that I always carry on me.

Kelli gestures for me to sit on the little day bed in her office, and sits herself on a footstool within reach of me. “An hour after each meal, test your blood sugar again, at least three meals a day. Those values should be below 140 – at 140, your blood sugar level starts damaging your organs. Write those values in your food journal. All day, write down every single bit you have to eat or drink.”

She tells me that I can't eat sugar in any form, including white flour, white rice, white potatoes, dairy, or cooked carrots. I can and should eat whole grains, fruit in moderation, vegetables to my heart's content, beans, nuts, seeds, and lean meats. She illustrates a balanced diet for me by telling me to visualize a plate. Half of it should be covered by vegetables and some fruit, a quarter should be whole grains, and a quarter should be a lean protein.

Kelli says that walking for twenty minutes a day will not only lower my blood sugar, but can shave hours off my labor. I decide that I'm going to walk every morning after breakfast, and record my exercise in my food journal, too.

I leave her office feeling scared and down on my self for my weight gain, but at the same time, I feel excited. I have always wanted to eat better and lose weight, but I lacked knowledge and motivation. Kelli gave me the knowledge, my son is my motivation, and the blood sugar monitor will give me immediate, quantifiable results. It's like performing a scientific experiment on myself. I hypothesize that I will lose weight, learn a lot about how my body works, and that I will give birth to my son happily and healthily at home.

I'm almost more afraid of the possibility of having to go to a hospital than I am of accidentally killing my baby by eating the wrong foods, and I feel terrible about it. But I think I may have a phobia of hospitals stemming from the December of 1993, when my mother went to the hospital with a nosebleed, returning weeks later too weak to get out of bed.

Those were my mother's last days. We had just moved into a new house, a strange house, cold and tense but full of people. What was once a garage became our den. One side of the den opened to our kitchen, where my sister, brother, cousins, and I could see Meemaw and various aunts and uncles murmur among themselves while pouring themselves coffee, or booze.

I was twelve, my sister was nine, our brother was seven, and all we wanted to do with our winter vacation was watch cartoons and eat. We'd literally just moved in, having just said our goodbyes to our friends, who we didn't expect to ever see again, and move across the city to a different school district, where we'd be the new kids, and have to make friends all over again. We didn't understand, or refused to accept, the fact that Mom was dying.

From the kitchen, I could see Mom lying on a queen size bed in the living room, Dad by her side. Our *butsudan*, a large rosewood cabinet that Mom had custom built by a friend to hold our *gohonzon*, prayer books, beads, and stools, stood open at the end of the room where Mom could see it. The *gohonzon*, a small rectangle of rice paper covered with sacred writing in ancient Japanese, hung in the center of the open *butsudan*. It seemed to grow and shrink as the chanting of Mom's friends filled the room. "*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*," they chanted, for hours, filling the room with a rhythmic pulse.

In front of the Butsudan stood our altar, a small wooden table decorated with fresh cut greens from our bushes on either side of the incense burner, white pillar candles behind the greens, fresh fruit in the offering bowl in the center, and a large bowl-shaped bell on the floor next to the right leg of the table, to be rung as a signal to the chanters of the beginning and ending of prayer sessions.

Mom's and Dad's families were rural Southerners, and Christian. I overheard them talking to each other about the Buddhists, making fun of them for being different, as I slowly approached Mom, forced a smile, and asked her how she felt.

Mom looked at me and tried to smile. The left side of her body was paralyzed, including her face, so the left half of her mouth always frowned and her left eye was always wide open unless she reached up to pull her eyelid down with her hand. Her eyes were jaundiced, the yellow even more pronounced by the deep purple rings around them. I stared at the floor and asked if I could get her anything. "A popsicle," she whispered, and I hurried back to the kitchen to pull one out of the freezer. I unwrapped a pale yellow pineapple twin stick, and held it to her

mouth. I saw her teeth, black with dried blood, as she tried to nibble off a piece of the frozen sweet.

“Here, Sue,” Dad said, taking the Popsicle from me and breaking it in the middle, sending me to put the other half back in the freezer. I came back and watched Dad feeding Mom, watched her reach for the syrupy ice with her lips. I didn't know what I was supposed to do, so I just stood there, begging with my eyes for direction.

A couple of weeks prior, Dad had taken the three of us to see Mom while she was still in the hospital. The doctors wouldn't let my sister and brother into her room, and only allowed me after Dad argued for a while. I didn't understand why they didn't want us to see her, or why Mom had been in the hospital so long. She'd been in and out of hospitals as long as I could remember, but this time they didn't want her to leave. When they finally let me in the room, I barely recognized the thing lying in the hospital bed as my mother. Her belly was so bloated she looked ten-months pregnant, but I could see the shape of her bones through her green-tinged skin. There were tubes and needles sticking from her nose and veins, scary medical equipment everywhere. I kept edging toward the door.

Mom didn't want them keeping her alive with machines. She came home to our new house, which she chose for us in the week before she went to the hospital, because we all wanted our own bedrooms, and a swimming pool, and because it was in the same neighborhood where one of her best friends lived. Dad bought a new bed for her, because the water bed they'd slept in for years was too awkward for the living room and too difficult for her to get out of.

That was when all the people came: Dad's Mom, Dad's older sister and two younger brothers and their families, Mom's Mom, Mom's three younger sisters and three of her four

younger brothers and their families, and a dozen or so of Mom's friends. Our cousins ran around, screaming, fighting, and playing while their parents stood around talking, arguing, and joking. Mom's friends and Dad were constantly chanting to our Gohonzon, and Mom joined them when she could. There was a constant buzzing in the house that got louder and louder over the days, like an extended drum roll leading to its big cymbalic finale.

My mother made a sound, like a choked-off sob, for a reason not apparent to me, and she turned her head away from the barely nibbled Popsicle. Dad gave me the rest of it, and I returned it to the freezer, and then asked if I could go play. Dad told me I could, waving me away, and I hurried outside.

Not much in the mood for playing, I wandered around the new neighborhood, which was huge compared to the old one. There were houses everywhere, but no woods to hide in, no trees the right size for climbing, no familiar faces. I returned to the house after a few minutes and hurried to my bedroom, hoping people would forget I was there so I could just be alone for a while. I played Tetris on my brother's Gameboy until they called me out for dinner, and then retreated to my room as quickly as I could after eating.

Around eleven that night, Dad knocked softly on my door. "Ashley, your Mom is out of medicine. I have to go find her some more. I need you to stay out here with her."

I crept quietly from my room to sit by her feet, not turning on the lights, but taking solace in the dark. I watched her lying there, too tired to move, or maybe frozen with pain. Long moments passed in silence.

When Mom called my name, her voice was so weak I could barely hear her. I thought I could just help her to the bathroom and she could take it from there, but she couldn't even sit

herself up. I lifted her onto the portable toilet by her bed, and looked everywhere but at her as she defecated. I couldn't bring myself to wipe her properly when she finished; I was too disgusted and I hated myself for feeling that way. But the whole time I could only think that she was the mother; she should have been taking care of me.

As I helped Mom climb back in bed, she said "ow," but I didn't know why. She began to cry, and I felt horrible. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "You shouldn't have to see this. You shouldn't have to do this. I'm so sorry."

I was even gladder for the darkness, so she couldn't see my tears. I told her not to be sorry, that it wasn't her fault. When Dad got back I returned to bed, forcing myself to feel nothing, to think nothing, and lay awake for hours.

It was not quite two days after my twelfth Christmas when I woke to a soft masculine voice calling my name. Moonlight slipped through the closed blinds of the windows at the head and the side of my bed, casting my dresser, computer monitor, and closet in a ghostly glow. The only other light in the room came from the blaring red of my digital alarm clock, on the stand next to my head. 3:45 a.m.

My door opened, revealing the outline of my dad, his face hidden in shadow. "Get up, Ashley," he murmured. "Your mother just passed. You're going to Dorothy's. Get up, while I wake your sister."

He closed the door and I stared at it, listening to his soft call to my sister, the sound of her door opening. Get up, he'd said, so I lifted off my comforter with heavy limbs and forced myself to sit up, staring at the door as if it could answer my questions.

Mom was dead?

Impossible.

She always got better.

My door opened again, and Dad told me to follow him. I stumbled into the hallway, next to my nine-year-old sister, the stress blisters on her lips accentuated by her sleep-puffy face. Dad rushed us down the dark hallway and through the living room. I craned my neck, looking for the bed Mom had been lying on when last I saw her. The bed was there, but I couldn't see Mom. I couldn't see the dark outline of her body. I couldn't even see the mass of blankets she'd needed to keep warm.

There were people there, standing by the windows, by the wall in the dining room. I could hear them breathing, soft murmurs, maybe of comfort. But the only person I could see was Dad, as he rushed us outside, into a friend's car, where we silently joined our seven-year-old brother.

Nearly a decade later, Dad would tell me that Junior woke up just before Mom died, that my little brother had gone to her. I felt like a horrible daughter because my brother sensed Mom's impending death when I did not. But now I think that maybe Junior woke up because, of the three of us, he had the strongest emotional bond to her. He was always her baby. She never abused him, either physically or verbally. The one time Meemaw had dared spank him for mouthing off, on a visit to Virginia two years prior, Mom had been angrier that I'd ever seen her. If she'd been chopping vegetables, she probably would have chased her mother out of her own house at knifepoint.

I loved my mother, but I never felt certain that she loved me. I didn't feel connected to her; rather, I kept the pieces of my heart behind the strongest fortress I could build, rarely feeling

safe enough to open up. I wanted to know she loved me; I wanted to have such a strong bond with her that I would always feel her love, even after her death. In the last few months of her life, we started building that bond in the time we spent alone together, talking over bowls of ice cream, singing in the car, watching *Wheel of Fortune* and *The Smurfs* on TV. But she died too soon.

As Dad rushed my body through the living room, my heart searched the darkness for a glimpse of the woman that had been the center of my universe. Ever since that moment, I've been searching for my mother; in the faces, voices, and stories of her surviving relatives; in a green river stone I found in Japan; in a glowing moonstone pendulum dancing in my hands in the light of the full moon.

I woke up this morning determined to make some changes so I can get my life together before my baby arrives and changes it all over again. Last night my moodiness peeked with me unable to fall asleep for six hours, and sobbing for half an hour, out of jealousy over Ranger's addiction to that stupid online fantasy game. He started playing it again a week ago, despite my warnings that he'd get sucked back in, and oh look, it's the first thing he checks every morning and the last thing he does before bed again.

I don't know if I can keep myself from getting so angry and mopey like that again, but I can at least try. So when I woke up this morning thinking, "Damn, I'm so sick of peeing," I decided to start thinking, "Yay, I get to enjoy the sensation of relieving a full bladder!" instead. We'll see how well that works.

I have another sonogram today, and I'm finding it much more interesting than the last one because he is so much bigger now. I wish I could afford to purchase the video of it. I love watching his little legs kicking me, his hands opening and closing, his belly moving as he practices breathing, and his mouth opening and closing as he practices swallowing. The radiologist says he looks very healthy. I don't think he looks too big, and the radiologist didn't seem to think he does either, but I'll feel more relaxed when I talk to Kelli in a week.

Half of me can't wait to hold him in my arms, and the other half hopes he stays in there another month or two so I can get my blood glucose under control. No matter what I do, my blood glucose level is always around 120 in the morning, 130 after breakfast, and doesn't drop under 100 until the late afternoon. It's supposed to be under 100 when I wake up and under 140 after I eat. Maybe my body is confused.

My poor fingers have a lot in common with Swiss cheese at the moment. I doubt anyone has any idea how much strength it takes for me to prick my fingers. I've been terrified of needles since I was five or six, after watching a doctor sew my sister's lip back together.

It was a beautiful fall day in Little Rock, Arkansas, after Mom recovered from the shooting, but before she started being abusive. I was six, my sister was three, and our brother was one. Mom seemed sad that morning, so I asked cherubic little Rose to help me find flowers to give to Mom, wanting to cheer her up. I searched and searched, but I couldn't find many flowers in the grass in front of our carport. When I looked up, I saw Rose toddling way out by some boulders in the middle of a huge empty field that separated our yard from the air force landing strips.

"Rose, come back!" I called, and she obediently turned toward me. She tripped once on the rocks, picked herself up, then toddled over with a fist full of little yellow wildflowers. I thanked her and hugged her before noticing her split upper lip and the trail of tiny bloody footprints on the carport.

"Mom!" I shouted, picking up my sister, who was half my size, to protect her bleeding feet. I carried her through the door and into the dining room, where Mom sat at the table, chatting on the phone with her sister.

Mom took one look at us, and stood, saying, "I'll call you back. Rose has a bloody lip. Uh huh. Love you too. Bye." Mom put the phone into the receiver in the kitchen, and pulled the first aid kit out of the drawer. "What happened?" she asked, as she cleaned Rose's scrapes.

"She fell on the rocks—" I started to explain, but Mom cut me off.

"What was she doing all the way out there?" Mom buckled baby Junior into his bucket car seat, carrying it in one arm as she scooped up Rose in the other, and led me to the car. I climbed in the passenger seat and buckled myself up, fighting tears.

Mom was silent as she put my younger siblings in the back seat, but lectured me as she buckled herself in and started our little red Buick Summerset. "She's three, Ashley. She doesn't have common sense yet. You're her big sister. It's your job to protect her. I can't be there all the time. Promise me you'll look out for her."

"I promise," I said, staring out the window as my eyes overflowed. As we pulled out of the driveway and drove down the road on the way to the clinic, I watched the small pile of yellow flowers, abandoned on the carport, blowing into the grass.

I remember that promise very clearly, though I couldn't have known how important it would become to me over the years, when, later in her childhood, Rose would need medical care for injuries which were not obtained so innocently. I wonder if Mom knew in her heart that one day I'd be protecting my sister from her.

When I was eleven, going into the sixth grade, my relationship with Mom transitioned from victim and abuser to caretaker and invalid. In the months leading up to the nosebleed that put her in the hospital, Mom began losing her ability to walk, as her strength faded. Her temper mellowed out in the last few months, and she started treating me as her best friend, someone she went to for advice, comfort, and company. She often complained to me about Allen treating her like a child, or about my sister and brother, whom she referred to as "the kids," not behaving themselves. I still call Rose and Junior "the kids," though we are all in our twenties.

One day, as we crossed the parking lot on our way into Wal-Mart, I slowed my pace so Mom could keep up. She choked back a sob and said, "I'm sorry."

I was so stunned, I couldn't speak or walk for a moment. "For what?" I asked.

Mom gestured at her body, as she took a step past me. "For embarrassing you."

"You don't embarrass me!" I jogged a couple steps to catch up with her, looking her up and down, trying to figure out why she'd think she embarrassed me. Her hair was short and combed, but she had a little rooster tail on the very top of her crown that she could never get to stay down, no matter how much gel she slopped on it. Her makeup looked severe and very 80s on her pale face, but not embarrassingly so. She wore a classy blue turtleneck and long blue jeans though it must have been 90 degrees outside.

Maybe she was talking about her crooked mouth, or her permanently wide eye. I wasn't sure, but I put an arm around her shoulder, trying to show her I was proud to have her by my side. I barely let my arm touch her shirt, knowing I was a heavy girl and that she wasn't as strong as she used to be.

“Too heavy, sweetie,” Mom said, shrugging away my arm, and it was my turn to be embarrassed.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, feeling like an inconsiderate fat ass, and followed her silently into the store.

The sicker and weaker Mom became, the more Dad entrusted me to take care of her while he worked. He made me promise not to let Mom eat fast food, and then Mom would beg me to ride my bike to Hardees's for her. Dad would ask me to keep Mom from picking Rose and Junior up early from daycare, and I would find myself pleading with Mom in the car and trying to distract her from wanting to punish Rose for wetting the bed or some other unforgivable offense.

I never understood why Rose took the brunt of Mom's violence. She was beaten several times for every single time my mother beat me. I have always resembled my father, the man who stole my mother's life. But Rose looks like Mom. Rose was sweet and shy and never stood up for herself, whereas I was stubborn, proud, and always talking back. If I got in a mood, I would badger Mom and make her angry on purpose, but Rose always tried to please her.

Maybe my sister reminded Mom too much of herself. Maybe in attacking Rose, Mom was reliving the abuse she survived, but taking on Roger's role. Maybe that was the only way

she felt she could reclaim her personal power. Or maybe, in some twisted logic, she was trying to make Rose fight back, so she wouldn't be a victim all of her life.

I don't think my mother was a bad person. I think she was damaged, wounded, desperately in need of healing. But there is no excuse for child abuse. Rose will never forgive Mom for what she suffered at Mom's hands.

I can't excuse the crimes my father and mother committed, but I have to find a way to understand them. I have to find the humanity in both my parents in order to have any faith in my own. I have to recognize the source of my parents' horrid acts, so I can break the cycle of violence that overtook my family generations ago.

We spent Christmas at Rose's house, with her boyfriend and Junior. Rose gave me a pretty fairy necklace and a green and white hand-sewn bib and burp cloth for Aiden. She made whole grain pancakes with butter and agave syrup for our holiday meal, with fruit salad. My blood sugar still hasn't recovered, despite taking a long walk last night and one this afternoon. But it was worth it. I think.

It's New Year's Eve, and Kelli just arrived. Today is the home visit prenatal appointment, and from here out I'll be seeing her weekly until I give birth. I've been telling Ranger and Cordelia about this visit for weeks, because I'm so excited that they will finally get to meet Kelli. I encourage them to ask Kelli every question that they can think of, to allay their concerns about my giving birth in this house.

As I welcome Kelli through the front door, Ranger smiles warmly and shakes her hand, then goes into the other room and sits at his computer. Kelli turns to greet Cordelia, but Cordelia

picks up Alexandria, and turns without a word, taking Alexandria out of the house through the garage.

Kelli turns to me with a raised eyebrow.

I force a laugh, shrug, and say, "I guess they don't have any questions or concerns."

Kelli follows me into the den, where I sit in the recliner and rock myself, and she sits across from me on the ottoman. I show her my food journal, and she says that my blood sugars look good, so I'm managing my gestational diabetes well with my eating choices and exercise.

"And I'm losing weight," I tell her, pride and relief apparent in my voice. "I've lost twenty pounds this month. I can't remember ever before seeing the number on the scale go down!"

"That's fantastic," Kelli says, strapping the sleeve of her blood pressure monitor to my arm. "Congratulations!"

"Your blood pressure is excellent, as usual." Kelli says, and hands me the urine test strip. She goes to her car to get a box of birth supplies for me, which she will leave in my room for the big day, while I run to the bathroom. When she returns, she tells me that my urine is boring, yay.

She has me lie on the ottoman so she can examine me, and tells me that Aiden has turned head down, and with luck, will stay that way until he is born so we don't have to worry about him going breech.

Then she gets out her Doppler, and we listen to Aiden's heart rate, which is also perfectly normal. This is when Cordelia changes her mind about ignoring Kelli. She stalks into the room and starts firing questions at Kelli about what she's going to do when I start hemorrhaging, or the baby can't breathe, or something else goes horribly wrong. Kelli calmly and intelligently

answers her questions, but Cordelia still seems angry, and once again takes Alexandria out of the house.

I am embarrassed by the way Ranger and Cordelia have behaved. Kelli came here prepared to answer any questions and quell any worries, but Ranger barely acknowledged her before taking off to play his game, and Cordelia was downright hostile and rude before running off with Alexandria.

This is not the way I always dreamed of bringing a child into the world. Where are the people who should be celebrating with me, eagerly awaiting his arrival? Where is the sense of family, or even community? The only people who seem genuinely eager to meet my baby other than myself are my sister and my birth team. I really wish Ranger was happy for me, rather than alternating between apathetic and stressed out over it.

I can't believe this year is already over. This time last year I was preparing semester exams for my ninth and tenth grade students. In February, I got my own apartment, and Morrigan and Moocher moved in with me in March. Our friendship started falling apart in April, along with my job. In May I had the spring Florida Pagan Gathering, just before I conceived Aiden on my birthday weekend, and things went really downhill with my former tenants. Ranger found me online in the last days of May, and we got together officially on the first of June. The rest of the year has flown by, the highs and lows of my relationship with Ranger, caring for Alexandria, fighting with Medicaid, feeling Aiden grow, trying to graduate...

I'll be starting 2009 trying to finish up my school work for my Master's degree before my baby gets here. Ranger and I have our room all set up. The co-sleeper is assembled and ready for the baby's arrival, along with the changing table. All his clothes, diapers, receiving blankets,

burp clothes, and first toys have been washed, folded, and put away, and there are baby blankets covering both the co-sleeper and the changing table to keep cat hair and dust from collecting so I don't have to wash the covers all over again when I go into labor.

In two weeks I'll be officially full term. How crazy is that? I'm so ready, and so not.

JANUARY

I am both scared and excited that my cervix is already sixty percent effaced, or thinned out, and two centimeters dilated. Kelli could poke her finger through those two centimeters to feel my baby's head. But he hasn't dropped yet, so I still have time, though probably not as much time as my due date, January 31st, suggests.

Tomorrow Rose is going to cut my hair and highlight it again for the first time since my wedding in 2006. This is the most gorgeous my hair will ever look, so I might as well take advantage of it.

My blood sugar is mostly under control. I learned this week that sugar free candies that use sugar alcohol are addictive and terrible for me. I couldn't stop eating them until I realized I went through twenty dollars of candy in two days and that they were making me feel sick. And making me gassy while they were at it. Yuck.

My feet hurt all the time now. I almost wish I had crutches. We get pregnant parking...why not pregnant crutches, just for the last month or so?

When I was in fifth grade, I played little league baseball, in a team that had only one other girl. I loved batting more than anything, except maybe sliding into base. One afternoon, toward the middle of the season, I slid into second base. That turned out to be a bad idea.

The coach had raked the dirt at third and home base to soften them up, but not first or second. My knee hit hard sun-baked clay, and it hurt so much I couldn't walk. My coach had to carry me to Dad's car, while Dad opened the door.

The coach strained to carry me. I was chubby, but most of my thick body consisted of muscle, from running, climbing trees, biking, and wrestling with my sister and brother. But most

of the girls in my school were lean and skinny, and most of the boys too. The one girl and two boys who were decidedly fat were shunned and teased, and watching my coach sweat and huff and puff to carry me made me suddenly self-conscious about my own weight.

Mom had been calling me fat for years. “Do you want to look like your Grandma?” she’d demanded when I opened the fridge looking for snacks. By “Grandma,” she meant Roger’s mother, the largest person I’d ever seen at that age. Looking back, I’d guess Grandma was around three hundred pounds, about the size I am now. It was hard to sit in her lap because her belly was so big, just as Alexandria has a hard time sitting in my lap now. I loved my Grandma with all my heart, but I never wanted to look like her.

A few months earlier, Mom had taken me shopping for training bras. Dad told her she was wasting money, that I was too young to have breasts, that it was just fat. I was indignant at the time, thinking about the fat girl in my school, Bettie, and knowing she was twice my size. But staring into the reddening face of my coach, feeling him nearly drop me trying to put me in Dad’s car, I felt ashamed of my body.

The doctor in the emergency room said I’d torn the ligaments in my knee. He gave me a knee brace and crutches. I loved the crutches. They made climbing stairs an adventure. They made both children and adults pay attention to me, ask me what happened, care that I was in pain, and praise me for my bravery.

I hated the knee brace. It made my leg itch, and I wasn’t allowed to take it off for weeks, except to bathe. Having a busted knee made most of my outdoor activities impossible, so I read and reread every book I could get my hands on, from *The Chronicles of Narnia* to the Ramona books, to Stephen King’s *It*.

Crutches also meant Mom picked me up after school. Dad insisted she leave Rose and Junior until he got off work, and asked me to talk her out of picking them up whenever possible. Looking back, I think those weeks are what made Mom start looking at me as more of an equal than a child.

“They’re having more fun here, Mom, on the playground.” I’d say when she picked me up. “What are they going to do if we bring them home? Rose will run over to Mark’s, and Junior will pester you and pester you and whine until he gets whatever he wants. But here, he’ll wear himself out running around the playground, and he’ll be tired and ready to settle down by this evening, when Dad picks them up.”

Thus I mastered the art of persuasion, adding finesse to my already strong skill of manipulation. I learned to read Mom’s mood, to predict whether reasoning would work, or if I’d have to work in a bribe (“If you let them stay, we can go get Hardees’s food, and they won’t know so they can’t tattle to Dad that you had food you’re not allowed to eat...”) or a threat (“You remember that caseworker, Mary? She checks up on us and asks whether you’ve been following the rules about leaving Rose in daycare until Dad picks her up.”)

Becoming Mom’s babysitter meant I took on the brunt of the abuse, but it also meant that I spent more time with her when she was in a good mood. Some days she was a monster. Other days she was my best friend. We’d eat fast food in secret, which Dad forbade because Mom was supposed to keep her immune system as strong as possible, or because it was a waste of money. Mom would complain to me about Dad, how he treated her like a child, or how he didn’t trust her alone with Rose. Sometimes she’d ask me for advice about how to deal with Dad, or how to make up to Rose for an undeserved beating.

When my knee healed, I rode my bike to and from school. I was supposed to go straight home, but one afternoon I couldn't suppress my craving for beef jerky. I rode my bike to the nearest convenience store, trying to think of a valid excuse for breaking the rule. I called Mom from the pay phone and told her that I'd gone to the store because some guy in a car had been following me home and I didn't want him to know where I lived.

The lie worked too well. Mom told me to stay at the store, that she'd come get me. She arrived about the same time as the police, who gave me patronizing looks as I repeated my story, making up details on the spot to answer their questions.

"What did he look like?"

"I don't know. The window was tinted dark and rolled up to his eyes."

"What color was his hair?"

"...Dark."

"Was it black?"

"No, more like dark brown."

"What did the car look like?"

"...Dark."

"...Dark brown?"

"No, it was black. You know, a black car..."

Mom had her arm on my shoulder. She had the same look in her eyes that Dad had the time when he had to pick us up from the Department of Children and Families office. Like she was afraid she was going to lose me.

I felt bad for the lie, but her looking at me like that made me feel warm inside. It gave me hope that despite the way she screamed at me and beat me sometimes, she still wanted me, that she loved me.

A month later, she took me to see my little league team in their final game of the season. My team won, and even though I didn't finish the season, I got to take home one of the green and gold trophies as well.

As we walked back to the car, I told Mom I saw the guy from the black car in the bleachers. She called over the cops that were patrolling, who took my statement with rolling eyes.

“How did you recognize him if you only saw his eyes last time?”

“I recognized his eyes. The way he looked at me.”

“Really? What color are his eyes?”

“...Dark.”

Mom put her arm around my shoulder and held me close to her as we walked back to the car. I wasn't sure why I'd extended that lie at the time, but I wished we could just stand outside the car, so Mom would keep her arm around me. Looking back, I'm sure I just wanted to know that my mother loved me, and the protectiveness she displayed the first time I lied to her about a potential abduction had stayed with me. Until then, I believed that she hated me, but when I talked about a strange man lurking about, she acted like she was afraid that she might lose me. That was the closest I got to thinking that she might truly want me, and maybe I wasn't so worthless and unlovable after all.

At my next weekly prenatal appointment, Kelli tells me that I'm still two centimeters dilated. My baby has finally dropped, which is exciting, because that means I should go into labor within about ten days. He dropped on the night of the full moon, which amuses me because the last time I tried to give myself a tarot reading on when he would make his entrance into the world, I drew The Moon card.

Cordelia makes me sit on waterproof pads no matter where I am in the house. Between that and Ranger treating me like a walking water bomb that could go off at any second, I'm about ready to pop someone.

I hallucinated my water breaking yesterday. That was fun. I was all atremble with excitement, and then the day went on, and there was no water and no contractions, and I finally passed out late in the afternoon, depressed and disappointed.

I have a theory that the moment I stop caring when he's born, I'll go into active labor. Of course, every time I think I'm at that point, I catch myself thinking of ways to encourage labor. My next date to fixate on, even though I've been trying to not care when he's born, is the 26th, because it's the New Moon, the Chinese New Year, and a solar eclipse. And because it means going into labor tomorrow.

I've had more calls in the last week from people wanting to know if I have a baby yet than I have had for the last six months total. I've been hearing from people who haven't even sent me an email in months. Yeah, I can't wait to meet him either, but if you haven't given a damn about me for the last six months, you probably aren't going to be the first person I call after he's born. Sheesh.

I've been cranky a lot this month. It's like PMS on steroids. It's a good thing I'm not the

type to lash out at people, or I would have no friends. I've also been good about exercising every day, and meditating at least every couple of days.

I'm alone in the house at the moment, trying to read *Birthing from Within*, but unable to focus. I'm surprised by a knock on the door. I'm not expecting anyone. I definitely wasn't expecting Dad!

“Hi,” I say, giving him an awkward hug. “What are you doing here? I mean, how are you?”

Dad scratches his head and looks at a brick beside my head, the way he always does when he feels awkward or nervous. “I have diapers for you,” he says.

“Oh,” I say, wondering if I should tell him that I've already bought, washed, and assembled three dozen cloth diapers. Allen pops open the trunk of his red Mustang GT and pulls out two huge boxes with www.diapers.com stamped on the sides. I immediately open them to find a couple bags in every possible size from newborn to four-year-old of unbleached, organic earth's best brand disposables, and a couple packets of baby clothes in the zero to three month size. “Aw, thank you!” I say, giving him a warmer hug this time.

“I can buy all his diapers, if you like.” Dad says, and I wonder why. Because he plans to be more involved in his grandson's life than he has been in mine since I moved out on my own? I hope so, but I doubt it. Still, I didn't ask him to do this. He's reaching out, trying to show his love the only way he knows how, by buying stuff.

Still, I don't want him to hurt my son like he's hurt me, making promises but rarely keeping them, giving a little bit of love and then a whole lot of nothing. Actually, I have the same concerns about Ranger and about Pan. They both remind me too much of my Dad. Pan

does the whole long spell of nothing punctuated by sudden communication that shows he wasn't totally paying attention the last time you spoke. Ranger still spends as little time with Alexandria as possible, only making an effort when he sees that I'm upset.

I'd rather my son have no father than a father who doesn't give a damn about him.

“Well, I have to go,” Dad says. He gives me another hug. “Let me know when you need more diapers.”

“Okay,” I say, waving as I watch him drive away.

A friend asked me if I'm sick of being pregnant. I told her that actually, I love being pregnant. I've had an awesome pregnancy with few unpleasant symptoms. I am tired of my eating plan and having to be careful that I don't get gestational diabetes, however. I can't wait to eat rice and potatoes again. I can't wait to have honey in my tea and fruit in my breakfast. I can't wait to have Kashi pilaf or quinoa or couscous with my dinner, all things I should be able to eat, but that make my blood sugar soar. I fantasize about eating carbs as frequently as I fantasize about holding Aiden in my arms.

I wonder if any woman has ever looked forward to going into labor as much as I have been for the last three weeks.

Pan called me yesterday. I didn't hear the phone ring and didn't call him back, but hearing the voicemail message that he left me made me aware of how pissed I am at him, still. I haven't heard from him since November, and this is all he had to say: "Ashley, I would like to come and visit you and the child. I don't have to stay long. I wanted to plan a visit for around Christmas week, but I did not plan that week very well. If it's okay, I would like to know what would be a

good time."

Fortunately, I had the night to get over being angry, and I feel more amused than anything now. I emailed the following response to him:

"Pan, I have to give birth to him before we can plan a visit. I'm not due until Saturday, and he could be born anytime between now and Valentine's Day.

"Have you thought about whether you want to be a part of his life, and how you can contribute? Have you found a job yet?

"If you don't want the responsibilities of being a father, I'd like you to sign legal papers giving up all claims to custody of him so he can have a chance of being adopted by my fiancé after our wedding. You could still keep in touch and visit him in that scenario, but I wouldn't expect anything from you as far as Aiden's care and upbringing would be concerned.

"If you want to be an official part of his life and contribute to the costs of raising him, then we need to talk about living arrangements, child support, and such, over the long term. Ranger has a daughter, Alexandria, with his ex, and the woman just dumps Alexandria off with relatives on the weekend and leaves her with us all week. It doesn't bother Alexandria now, but when she gets older, it's going to cause problems with school and friends and her sense of worth and identity, and I really don't want that for Aiden if we can help it.

"I'll let you know when he's born and we're ready for visits."

He hasn't responded yet. It'll probably be another few months before he gets around to it.

Bad fathers drive me nuts. Some bad fathers are abusive, some are neglectful, some are apathetic, and some are fathers by blood only, like my mother's father.

Around the time of my ninth Christmas, Mom brought my siblings and me to meet her father, Richard, for the first and only time. She made Rose and I wear floral, frilly skirts, and six year old Junior had to wear a dressy suit with a tie. Mom wore sweatpants and a sweater, which was all that would fit her swollen belly. When I complained about wearing a skirt on a cold day, Mom just said, “Your grandfather believes that girls should wear skirts and boys should wear pants.” She looked at my pixie cut regretfully. “He doesn’t believe in cutting girl’s hair, but it’s too late for that now. Just don’t tell him that we’re Buddhist, or he’ll just say we’re going straight to Hell and lock us out of his house.”

Richard was tall, skinny, and pale. I was his oldest granddaughter, whom he’d never met, but he was stiff when I hugged him, and only spoke to me with emotionless direct answers to my questions as I followed him around his beef farm.

The cows were adorable. Petting and feeding them was the only joy of the visit. Thankfully, I didn’t realize at the time that they would all be slaughtered in a couple of months. I thought it was just a bigger dairy farm, like our Uncle Hoyt’s.

We only stayed on the farm for about an hour, despite the four hour drive from Meemaw’s house. He neither waved nor spoke as we called out goodbye.

A week later, I overheard Mom ranting to one of her sister’s over the phone. “I went up there to show him his grandchildren. I didn’t have to do that! I tell him I’m dying, and what does he say? I shouldn’t have left the church! Then he writes me a letter. Doesn’t say a word about his grandkids, not a word about my disease. He wrote, ‘How dare you come to my home wearing pants?’”

I peered through the crack door as she thanked her sister for listening and hung up the phone. The room seemed to vibrate with the absence of her voice. She sat slowly on the bed, her back to the door. As her face lowered to her hands and her shoulders shook, I decided that I hated my grandfather. That was also the moment I decided I'd rather be a single mother than keep a bad father in my future children's lives.

Kelli told me at my prenatal appointment this morning that everything is good, except my iron is a little low, so I'm adding yet another supplement to the only gods know how many I take daily now.

My cervix is ninety percent effaced, and three centimeters dilated. That may mean I'll have a quick labor, if labor ever starts.

Aries thinks I'll go into labor tonight and give birth tomorrow. I hope he's right. Earlier this month I was thinking the 28th would be good numerologically. Ah, who am I kidding? I just want him born already!

Kelli thinks he'll be about nine pounds, with a thirteen and a half inch head circumference, which is smaller than I was thinking he'd be, but she's got way more experience than I do when it comes to newborns. His head is at zero station, which I think means pressing against the cervix and primed for the whole birthing journey.

I'm going to go nuts if I don't go into labor soon. I was so stir crazy last night, I went shopping at Wal-Mart at 2:00 a.m. I bought more baby clothes and a manual breast pump, which works, incidentally. The nipple stimulation didn't cause any contractions. Poop.

I've been bouncing him off of my cervix as if his amniotic sac were a basketball, hoping I could jar something into motion. I think I'm just lulling him to sleep. Wish I could sleep.

Come on, labor...start.

FEBRUARY

I feel like the Fool in the Tarot, swept up in daydreams of a blissful, adventurous future, not heeding of the voice of reason yapping at my heels, trying to keep me from stepping off the edge of a cliff. Every day, many times a day, for as long as I can remember, I've wished for, prayed for, chanted for, begged the universe for a baby of my own. I can't let myself think about things that could go wrong. I can't listen to the worries of well-meaning friends and family who think birth is dangerous and that doctors and hospitals are the reason women and babies survive birth in the modern age. I can't get frustrated and try to beat reality into their thick skulls.

I know I am going to have an incredible birth, and that I'm going to hold him in my arms and feel like he was always meant to be there. I can't wait to kiss every non-genital inch of his body repeatedly, until my love for him forms invisible armor, keeping him forever safe from injury and illness.

I know my love is going to grow bigger and more intense every day, even though it's hard to imagine ever being more full of love than I am right now.

How did my mother feel, when she was pregnant with me, nineteen, married to Roger? Was he abusive before I was born? I like to think that they were still madly in love, and Roger still treated her like a precious treasure. Maybe the abuse didn't start until I was born. Maybe Mom had postpartum depression, and started being snippy with Roger, and maybe her change in temperament made him feel insecure, and his insecurity triggered the abuse.

When I met my older sister, she told me that several years before he met my mother, Roger was in a motorcycle accident in which he lost one of his legs, and that he'd been a totally different man before that accident, loving, affectionate, his family the center of his world. But

after the accident, he started abusing his son, whom I've never met, another Junior, but he goes by his middle name now to distance himself from the memory of his abusive father. The attempted rape of his daughter happened after the accident, too.

Maybe Roger's brain was injured, and never fully recovered. I'd like to think so. I've learned that it's easier to forgive someone when you can think of them as damaged.

I've been working on forgiving and healing myself when I meditate, either in bed at night before I sleep, or on the patio alone in the golden light of evening. I envision myself as a little girl, alone, crying in the dark. I relive the painful memory that I want to heal, like when Mom attacked me with the knife, when she chased me across the living room beating me with a shoe, or when she spanked me with the plastic ladle so hard it left a doughnut-shaped bruise on my butt-cheek for a month. Then the woman that I am now takes the little girl that I was into her arms and tells her that it's okay, that it wasn't her fault. I tell her that Mom was sick, and she didn't mean to hurt her. Then I replay the scene in my head, changing it to what should have happened.

In one alternate memory, Mom chops vegetables on the stove, and I ask her if I can ride my bike up to the store. She says, "No, I'm making dinner and I don't want you to fill up on candy and junk food and not have room for what I'm cooking."

"Oh," I say, disappointed.

Mom stops chopping vegetables and turns to smile at me. "I know you are disappointed right now, and you really want beef jerky and candy. Thank you for understanding why I said no. Would you like to help me make dinner?"

“Okay,” I say, perking up, and Mom hugs me before helping me drag a chair to the stove so I can help.

The alternate memory hurts in a different way; it hurts because I know it's not real. But it shows me who I am now, and gives me hope that I will be the patient, understanding mother, rather than the impatient, angry one.

Forgiving my mother, and even my father, is much easier than forgiving Pan right now. After another month of no contact, Pan just finally responded to my email. He says, “I do like the thought of him/her having a father raise him and not a step-father. I would be willing to have Ranger adopt the child and give up any legal claim that I might have. It would please me to think of the four of you being one happy family. I would like to visit sometimes, but it is up to you if you want to tell him/her that I’m a father or an uncle.”

I can’t believe he doesn't even know that I'm having a boy! I sent him the sonogram pictures back in September. I have referred to our child as a "him," as Aiden, and as “my son” ever since I had those sonograms done. Reading between the lines, I see that Pan has absolutely no interest in being a father to our child. It hurts to think of the precious kicker inside me growing up knowing his father didn’t want him, and it makes me even more determined to make things work with Ranger, so that my baby will have someone to call, “Daddy.”

I hope Ranger can be the dad for my son that I’ve always wanted for myself. And if he’s not, I hope I have the courage and strength to leave him.

I just got home from my prenatal appointment. Ranger drove me, so he and Alexandria waited in the car, in the rain. Unsurprisingly, Alexandria had a meltdown before I returned to the

car, but she stopped crying as soon as I was there to entertain her. Obviously, I'm going to be an awesome mom.

Everything is normal, healthy, I'm still ninety percent effaced, and Kelli opened me up from three centimeters to four centimeters in cramp-inducing procedure called sweeping the membranes, with my permission, which involved her carefully sweeping a gloved finger between the membrane of my son's amniotic sac and the walls of my uterus near my cervix. Hopefully, that will help things move along.

Cordelia is staying with a friend at a hotel until Thursday, at a suggestion from us that she take a break from Alexandria. I really want to give birth while she's not here, as she's been passive aggressively trying to convince me to go to a hospital for months, and she makes me tense. I don't want to feel tense, stressed, or pressured when I'm in labor. Stress makes labor hurt. From my research of natural birth versus a hospital birth, I feel confident that the safest place for me to have my baby is at home, surrounded by a few people that I know and trust, who make me feel safe and loved, where I control the light, the temperature, how much I move, eat, and drink, and attended by a midwife who trusts my body, yet knows what to do in the off chance that something goes wrong.

Cordelia keeps telling me that I'm putting myself and my baby at risk by choosing to avoid the hospital. Even though the hospital is only a ten minute drive from our house, she thinks that I could bleed to death or my son could die before we make it there. She was a nurse before she retired, and she firmly believes that I need to be hooked up to machines to monitor my vital signs and the baby's heartbeat, an IV to keep me hydrated rather than drinking water or

juice, surrounded by doctors and nurses who know more about birth than I possibly could because they've witnessed more.

I keep telling her that people in the hospital have a skewed perspective of the human body, because healthy people who are not sick, injured, or otherwise afraid or in pain simply don't go to the hospital. Medical personnel are not required to observe a natural, peaceful birth for every induction or cesarean they witness.

I tell her that the medical community had to invent a whole new term for babies born too prematurely by cesarean section surgery due to the doctors' miscalculation of their due dates, "late preterm." I tell her that induction by Pitocin causes strong, painful contractions before the mother's body can produce endorphins to spare her the pain and before the baby's body is in position and ready to go; that stress and fear stall labor. I tell her that in a hospital, rather than helping the mother relax so labor can pick up on its own again, the medical staff is more likely to increase the Pitocin, offer an epidural, and declare "failure to progress" as the reason for wheeling the woman into surgery to cut the baby out, even though cesarean birth is far more dangerous for mother and baby than vaginal delivery.

She always brushes me off and walks away before I can tell her about the dangers of epidurals, or that cesarean births are preferred by medical staff because they are more convenient than waiting around for a baby and woman's body to decide they are ready. The fact that hospitals make more money off of a cesarean birth than a vaginal birth also makes me leery of a medicalized birth. I can go on and on about the benefits of home birth versus the risks of hospital birth, but I can't open a closed mind.

I talked to Kelli about wanting to give birth before Cordelia gets home, and we decided if labor doesn't spontaneously start by Wednesday, we'll induce Wednesday afternoon. With homeopathic remedies and natural techniques, not with drugs or synthetic hormones. I hate to induce at all, because I want my baby to choose his own birthday, when his lungs are ready for air and he's ready to greet the world. But I'm afraid that if Cordelia is here, her negative energy, words, and behavior might cause something to go wrong. Kelli says that the risks of natural induction are minimal, and that they will only work if the baby is ready, and I trust her.

Kelli arrives at a quarter to three on Wednesday afternoon. I welcome her inside, trembling with nervousness and excitement, hoping with all my heart that the natural induction will work. Kelli gives me homeopathic tablets of black and blue cohosh and tells me to allow them to melt under my tongue. They feel a bit chalky, but have no taste. I wait, concentrating on my uterus like I'm expecting it to burst into song. Nothing happens.

A half hour later, she gives me more. After another thirty minutes of waiting in vain for my uterus to perform, Kelli massages the energy meridians along my calves with a special musky citrus essential oil blend before giving me the last dose. The massage feels good along my calves, but hurts like the dickens along the outsides of my shins, where the meridian lines are supposed to be. I try to breath with my mouth loose and slightly open, because Ina May Gaskin says in her books that an open mouth and throat helps the cervix to open, but I end up hissing and holding my breath during the meridian massage.

After the last dose of tasteless homeopathic cohoshes, Kelli leaves to run errands, and I take the longest walk of my entire pregnancy, visualizing my cervix as a pink lotus, blooming,

and singing to my baby, telling him that I am *so* ready to meet him and that I hope he's ready to meet me. My son kicks in rhythm to my voice, but my uterus remains stubbornly still.

A couple hours later, Kelli returns, and leads me to the bedroom to check my cervix. I lie on the bed, staring at the ceiling, my feet resting on top of her thighs, and hope.

“You have four centimeters and are almost completely effaced,” she says. “Would you like me to strip your membranes, and see if we can get another centimeter?”

“Heck yeah,” I say, and concentrate on relaxing through the cramps I know will follow, remembering well how it felt last week.

“Okay, here goes,” she says, sweeping a finger along the edges of my cervical opening, gently separating the amniotic sac from the floor of my uterus. My cervix protests by feeling achy and crampy, but nothing I can't handle.

“There, we have five centimeters...wait,” she says, cocking her head as if listening to my body through her fingers. “That was a contraction. Did you feel it?”

“Uh,” I say, concentrating on the sensation. “It felt like a little tightening...”

“Huh,” she says. “Well, your amniotic sac was bulging during it. If we break your water, that should get things going. Or we can wait until it breaks on its own. It's up to you.”

“If we do, will it work?” I ask, worried that if I break my water before Aiden is ready to come out, he might stall, and I might have to go to the hospital. “I mean, is there any chance that...”

“If we break your water, I can promise you that you will have this baby tonight,” Kelli says, and smiles that serene, motherly smile I find so comforting as she awaits my decision.

I take a deep breath, and weigh my desire for a natural birth against my desire to see my baby plus my desire to have him before Cordelia gets home. I listen to my inner voice, concentrate carefully on my emotions, looking for any hint of dread, or any subtle warning that I should say no. All I feel is excitement and a thrill of joy. “Yes,” I say. I rest my hand on top of my belly, energy surging up my spine and down my arms, leaving goose bumps in its wake, just like I’d felt four years earlier in the first moments of Hawthorn’s labor. “Yes, let's do it.”

Kelli pulls something out of her bag, and then shows me what I can only describe as a finger condom with a thorn-like nub on the tip, which she puts on her index finger, explaining that it is not sharp and cannot hurt either me or my baby. She has me lie on a layer of disposable absorbent material as she reaches inside and tears the membrane just enough to allow amniotic fluid to escape in a warm gush, then a steady trickle.

Elated, I put on a disposable pad and waddle out into the living room to sit in the recliner I've claimed as my own during the past month. I call my sister and my best friend, letting them know it's officially The Night. Kelli unloads her supplies from her van and sets it all up in our bedroom, after I tell her I feel most comfortable there. It's the only place in the house that feels remotely mine. Ranger calls Alpheus, telling him how relieved he is that my water is finally broken, and he no longer has to worry about a spontaneous mess in the floor or in his car followed by a mad dash to the emergency room, the way labor always starts in movies.

Alpheus arrives first, more for Ranger's sake, I think, than my own. It still amazes me how well my ex-boyfriend and my fiancé get along. Dolphin and Aries arrive while Alpheus and Ranger smoke on the patio. They sit and chat with me in the living room while we wait for the

tightening sensation in my midsection to get stronger and more frequent. Kelli tells me to let her know when I feel one that I can't walk, talk, or think through.

I'm walking down the hallway with her when I feel it. I'm not afraid, so it doesn't hurt. I feel relaxed, eager, and when it hits, I remember Ina May Gaskin's words to her laboring clients, that each rush is "an incredibly interesting sensation that requires all of my attention." That's exactly what it is. Nothing exists outside my body in this moment. I am pure sensation, a wave of energy shooting from the tip of my tail bone up my spine, a squeezing wave just under my breastbone that shudders all the way down my front to my vagina, as my uterus pushes my baby into position all by itself.

Kelli helps me back to the rocking recliner in the living room, and Rose arrives shortly after, with a gift from her coworkers at a local organic vegetarian café, Dandelion Communita – a custom fruit salad made just for me of organic blood oranges, tangerines, pears, apples, bananas, and blueberries. I'd asked Rose to make me a fruit salad while visiting her on Christmas day, but she was working when I went into labor, so her co-workers made it instead. I can't eat it until after I have Aiden, because I don't want my blood sugar to surge, but I can't wait to eat it after he's out!

Dolphin, Aries, Rose, Kelli, and I all gather in the family room, chatting about each other's lives while we wait for my son to make his debut. Ranger and Alpheus continue to chain smoke on the patio. Kelli curls up on the love seat in the corner, finishing up one baby hat, and then starting on my baby's.

Aries watches her intently as she starts the new hat, and says, "I've always wanted to learn how to crochet. Are you working from a pattern?"

Kelli smiles, and holds up the bit of yarn and her two needles. “I’m knitting. Crocheting is with one hooked needle. And yes, I’m working from a pattern I developed for my own labor project, a gift for each new baby. See, the little circle on the top of the hat?”

She gestures to it and waits for Aries' nod before continuing. “There are seven stitches in that circle, representing the seven sacred directions of my people, the Seneca. Next, I will knit thirteen rows, one for each moon in the year. And I will finish with seven scallop stitches.” She points out the shell-shaped stitches on the bottom row of the finished hat.

I’m fascinated by her explanation, touched by the blessing she's weaving into the first piece of clothing my son will wear. I wish I’d thought of something incredibly meaningful to give him. Though I suppose giving him life is pretty special.

I rock in the recliner, my attention turning more and more inward as my labor progresses. I hear the conversations going on around me, even participate in them, but they are starting to fade into a fog, as if my surroundings are a quickly fading dream, and the movement inside my body is the only reality.

Kelli's friend, Maggie, arrives to assist as part of my labor support team, as my doula. Though I only vaguely remember meeting her briefly at a couple of my prenatal appointments, I feel comfortable with her, and appreciate her calming voice and encouragement.

Kelli flips her cell phone shut, pockets it, and tells me that her assistant, Kristie, is on her way but will be at least another 45 minutes. I’m glad Kristie will be here for my birth. She took care of one of my prenatal appointments while Kelli was on vacation in South America in November, and she laughed at all my quips, telling me I should be a stand up comedian. I hope I can make her laugh tonight. I want lots of laughter during my labor.

Maggie is the first to notice when my contractions become more intense. She crosses the room, kneels in front of me, and takes my face in her hands while looking into my eyes, saying, “You are doing wonderfully, Ashley. Just relax. Your body is just preparing for the arrival of your baby. Breathe deeply. You can do this!”

Mindful of the power of words and how thought and mood affects perception, I choose to think of the tightening sensations in my belly as pressure. Rather than fear, I choose to feel excitement that this is really happening, ecstatic that my lifelong dream of having a child of my own is finally coming true. I can feel him squirming between contractions and I wonder how he feels at this moment, if he feels bewildered, or comforted, like he’s getting a full body massage as my body prepares his for imminent entrance into the outside world.

Ever since a college anthropology course, when I'd read about water births, I'd wanted to give birth in water so that my baby’s entrance into the world would be more peaceful, less of a shock than it would be to move from a warm, wet, dark environment into a cool, dry, lit one. As my rushes come closer together, I ask Kelli to set up her birthing tub. Kelli, Maggie, and Ranger set up the tub in the kitchen, filling it with hot water from the water heater in the adjoining laundry room.

Kelli adds essential oils of clary sage and ginger to aid my labor, and as I sink in the warm water, I feel like a pampered goddess in a spa. Ranger rubs my neck and shoulders while Maggie, Kelli, and Rose offer me sips of water or juice from a straw, homeopathic arnica to help with any pain, which I never feel, a cool washcloth for my eyes, or ice to cool the water when it starts feeling too warm.

As my rushes become more intense and closer together, I begin vocalizing, which is a pretty term that roughly translates to “bellowing low notes of continuous sound from the hoo-ha.” Dolphin looks worried and helpless from her perch on the stool by the breakfast bar. During a break between rushes, I tell her, “It doesn't hurt, just so you know. It's just really intense pressure, and making noise is like a release, like a tea kettle whistling as it blows off some steam.”

Dolphin grins at me, and says, “I'm just impressed you can make that much noise! And you said you couldn't ki-ai!”

I laugh, remembering karate classes with her, how I was too timid and unsure of myself to release energy vocally, to ki-ai. My laughter is cut short by the next bellow, which sounds so much like the noise a cow makes, I laugh even harder afterwards.

Ranger continues to rub my back and shoulders until, after the tenth or so time he asks me how much longer it's going to take, I suggest he go keep Alpheus and Aries company in the living room, and assure him that I won't hate him forever for leaving my side.

After he leaves, it takes a moment for me to get past my irritation at him. If I were in pain, his tension might indicate worry for me. But since I'm consciously expressing how wonderful and excited I feel, he is coming across as bored and impatient. Perhaps it's difficult for him, as an Atheist, to see how miraculous and incredible these moments are to me, or maybe he just doesn't care because the child isn't his. Regardless, I find it much easier to relax and truly enjoy my labor once he takes his worry and impatience out of the kitchen.

I spend a couple of hours in the tub, alternating positions from reclining on my back to squatting, to lying on my tummy, getting restless. My three hundred and twenty pound body

does not fit as well in the deep plastic tub as I would have liked, and I start letting my legs hang over the sides to stretch my calves and feet to keep them from cramping.

As endorphins and other hormones flood my body, relaxing me, opening me, and preparing the way for my son's entrance, I want nothing more than to go to sleep. After every rush, I relax against the tub and close my eyes, feeling like I could start dreaming if I wasn't afraid I'd drown in the meantime.

The nausea hits me without warning. Then my entire body feels flooded with restless energy, even though I simultaneously feel heavy and unable to move. The sensation suddenly morphs into feeling like my body is about to split into two, or explode. I remember from Gaskin's books that just before the pushing phase, mothers "transition" into it by experiencing feelings ranging from nausea and discomfort to panicking and losing confidence in their ability to survive the birth. To relieve the tension, and head off the panic, I facetiously announce, "Well, this must be transition, because I feel like I'm going to die!"

As Kelli and Maggie burst into laughter, Kelli's assistant, Kristie, walks into the room, also laughing. "I knew she'd make me laugh as soon as I walked in the door!" she says, grinning at me.

I appreciate Kristie's presence in the next moments, first because she rubs my feet while Rose puts a cold washcloth over my eyes, and Maggie has me sip more juice from a straw. Transition passes, and my body moves itself into squatting position without my conscious effort, and with the next rush, my bellow turns into a grunt, and I find myself pushing.

Kelli looks up from knitting my son's hat and stares at me a moment, before asking, "Am I going to finish this in time?"

My laugh is cut short by another rush that ends in pushing.

I'm vaguely aware of my sister running around, helping the midwives and encouraging me, following their lead. I hear her telling the men in the other room that they need to watch the way they feel or think, because I might pick up on their worry or tension, and my heart overflows with love and pride for her, but I am too far gone in labor-land to tell her so.

The urge to push is relatively weak at first. I roll onto my side, my other side, to my hands and knees, squatting and leaning over the tub, and squatting and leaning back against it. The last three positions feel best. A couple contractions even find me on my back, because my legs are cramping, and my feet are wrinkled and numb, yet throbbing. Someone rubs my feet and calves at some point, which feels like a wonderful release of blocked energy.

After pushing for what feels like twenty minutes, Kelli checks me with her fingers, and finds a little bit of cervix still holding back my son's head. She pushes at it while I bear down, and it's much easier to figure out what muscles with which to push when I can feel her fingers. We get the last of the cervix away in that fashion, and the endorphins are making me crave sleep again. I hear myself saying "a nap would be heaven" after every contraction, and finally, I decide to move back to my bed so I can rest between pushes without inhaling water.

In a flurry of activity, all the ladies run around me, moving the birthing stuff back into the bedroom on the other side of the house, while Kelli helps me out of the tub. I notice my birth team blocking view of my body from the men as we make our way through the house, and feel like that was thoughtful of them, though I couldn't care less about being seen naked right now. Before I went into labor, I had a birthing outfit picked out, but once labor really started, naked

was the only way I wanted to be. I am no longer ashamed of this large, incredible body, the body that conceived, housed, nurtured, and protected my baby as he grew.

On the bed, I discover that lying on my side makes the contractions hurt, so for the most part, I stay in the chest and knees position, which lets me rest between contractions and almost sleep. I feel so out of it that I can't figure out how to sustain the pushes to move my baby out.

I become frustrated, and the sound of the men talking in the other room distracts and irritates me, so I ask Rose to shut the door, not realizing that Dolphin is standing in the hallway.

Kelli says, "How about we move you to the birthing stool, and let gravity help?"

I stare at her like she's speaking in tongues for a moment, and when my foggy brain finally deciphers her question, I say, "Okay."

The birthing stool looks like someone turned a rocking chair on its side, but cut off the chair part, and then cut handles into each end of the curved runners. It's sturdy, though, and gives my birth team much more room to help me. Maggie and Kristie help me spread my thighs as far as they will go, and Kelli kneels between them, while Kristie contorts herself on the floor with her head under my butt to keep a hot compress against my perineum with one hand, and wipe away fecal matter with the other. They are all my heroes, and I am grateful at the matter-of-fact comportment of these experienced ladies, keeping me confident in my most vulnerable moments.

On the birthing stool, with Kelli's assistance, I finally figure out how to push effectively, and then how to sustain it. I ask Kelli to use her fingers to guide me, so I can focus on pushing against them. I smell clary sage oil punctuated by occasional whiffs of my own feces at different points, and feel impressed all over again at how efficient the ladies are at keeping me clean and

the floor and bed covered. I am so grateful that I feel so comfortable with them that I can poo on them and not feel bad or embarrassed about it.

They know I can do it, and encourage me over and over. Incredibly attentive and intuitive, they know what I need and want before I do, half the time. Rose is also a huge help, just by helping them. She becomes an active member of my birth team, even though she's never witnessed a birth before. I could burst with pride for her.

Dolphin and Ranger are also a big help. The years Dolphin and I have spent as friends makes me feel grounded just by knowing she's sitting there, and helps me remember that I'm never alone. Ranger's presence also grounds me, and helps me feel loved and strong. Knowing Alpheus and Aries are in the other room reminds me that the kitchen and bedroom just aren't big enough to hold all the people who love and support me. Hearing their voices but not seeing them subconsciously reminds me of all my friends and loved ones who have been looking forward to my baby's birth but can't be here to witness it.

I feel that my mother, Roger, and Grandma are present with me, encouraging me, embracing me with unconditional love. I wonder how they would have felt about all of this if they were still alive. Grandma, I think, would have wanted me to go to a hospital. She had nine kids of her own before the days of epidurals, and would probably think me crazy for wanting to experience a natural birth.

Mom would have approved of my choice, I'm sure. In the last years of her life, she often took me to health food stores, where she got chlorophyll and other alternative natural immune boosters. She chose to end her life at home, warm and as comfortable as she could be, surrounded by loved ones, rather than alone and cold in a sterile hospital room, hooked up to

monitors and an IV. Though her body failed her in the end, I'm sure she would have trusted my body to bring my baby into the world, just as Kelli, Maggie, and Kristie do.

Roger probably would have wanted me to be in a hospital. He'd feel like he had more control there, and he may have been right. Assuming he hadn't shot my mother or died in jail afterwards, I imagine he and Mom would have had a vociferous fight over their differences of opinion, though stubborn as I am, neither of them would have been able to change my mind once I'd made it.

As my baby starts moving down my birth canal, I think back a few months, when I read tarot for the morning shift at a psychic fair in Orlando, and received another special postmortem gift from my mother, less tangible than the green river stone from Japan, but possibly more precious.

My mentor's mentor, George, was a medium, and I saw him come in to start the afternoon shift. I packed my tarot cards and reading cloth, and when I looked back up, George was standing in front of me, staring above my right shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't usually volunteer free readings, but there is a young woman absolutely demanding that I speak to you for her. Do you know a woman who died young, with brown hair and big glasses?"

I sat down before my knees gave out. "Yes," I whispered.

"Is her name Susan?"

"Holy crap, that's my mother." I said, sinking back into my chair, fighting tears. Ever since I started studying psychic development, mediumship, and divination, and in every reading I'd ever gotten from tarot readers and mediums, I'd always hoped to communicate with my

mother, but she'd never shown up. I'd never told any reader my mother's name, or what she looked like.

“Susan wants me to tell you that she's sorry,” George said, still looking past me.

I closed my eyes, swallowed hard, and nodded.

“She says that she loves you, and your sister and brother. She says that she's been with your Dad all this time, and that's why you couldn't find her. He needed her more. You were stronger. You've always been stronger. She's showing me a tooth. You need to see a dentist.”

I burst out laughing, and nodded, with tears streaming down my face.

“She's also showing my glasses. You need to get your eyes looked at. And she's showing me...I think it's a pendulum. It's a white stone, on a silver chain, and it looks like it's glowing. She says that you are right, that she does talk to you with it. Do you know what I'm talking about?”

I pulled a small black pouch out of my purse, and extracted my pendulum, a pale moonstone suspended from a silver chain. George nodded.

“That's exactly it,” he said. “That's all I'm getting from her. Do you have any questions?”

“Does she...” I searched for the right words. “Has she really forgiven Roger?”

George was quiet for a moment, then nodded. “She says they are different now. On the other side, they are different. They are together, watching over you together, and they forgive and love each other. There is another woman there too, an older woman...Roger's mother?”

I nodded. Grandma died a few years ago. I still mourned her deeply.

“They are all together, watching over you, helping you. They send their love. They keep showing me teeth and glasses. They are very concerned about your health. Teeth and glasses, again.”

“I’ll go see a dentist and get my eyes checked,” I smiled, repressing tears.

“They say, Congratulations. Congratulations...” George’s eyes came back into focus. “I can’t see them anymore.”

“Thank you,” I said, standing to hug him, giving him a watery smile as I hurried out of the room, out of the store, into the privacy of my car where I struggled to control myself. I wanted to laugh, to shout, to punch something, to sob until there was nothing left inside. I’d found another bit of my mother, an epilogue to her life, that confirmed what I’d wanted to believe about her since she died all those years ago. It may have been the best gift anyone could ever have given me, but it also brought up all the hurts of the past, all the loss, the pain of always searching but never finding even a hint of her. What good were my psychic talents if I couldn’t communicate with the one discarnate I missed the most?

But she said, through George, that I could talk to her through my pendulum, that she’s always with me, and that was the thought that I decided to hold on to.

And now I find I don’t really need my pendulum. I can see her in my mind’s eye, smiling down at me as I work to bring her grandson into the world.

In the last fifteen minutes, the pushing urge becomes all consuming. I grunt louder and longer than I ever have before, pushing until I think I can’t possibly push anymore, surprised when my body adds an extra, stronger push at the end of what I thought was all I could do. My

throat is raw and I taste mucus from the grunting, as if I'm coughing up phlegm rather than vocalizing as I move my baby's head down my birth canal.

I don't feel the infamous "ring of fire" when he crowns, just an itchy, stretchy feeling. My birth team sets up a mirror so I can see his head, but my glasses are still in the kitchen, so I reach down and touch him instead. His head feels like a slimy hairball, and I almost laugh, but suddenly, I can't think or do anything but push. My body totally takes over. His head comes out, and Kelli wipes his nose and mouth, then turns slightly to put down the cloth, whirling back around just in time to catch my baby as he shoots out of me, seconds after crowning. I almost laugh again at the wide-eyed expression on Kelli's face, which is the only face close enough for me to see without my glasses.

But then she puts his warm, slippery body on my belly, and I cradle him to me, and the rest of the world ceases to exist. His head is covered in short brown hair, looking darker in the birth gore. His eyes are dark and almond-shaped, his nose flat and round, his lips full and perfect in his scrunched up, beautiful face. He could be any ethnicity in this moment. He is the entire human race, the past, present, and future. He is the entire universe, my universe, the overwhelming precious answer to every prayer I'll ever make.

"Talk to him," Kelli says, as she tugs on my umbilical cord to see if the placenta is on its way, while Maggie and Kristie clear away the blood, mucus, and other fun birth substances I thankfully can't see.

"Hi, baby boy." I whisper. "Welcome home."

EPILOGUE

My thirtieth birthday falls on a hot, cloudless Monday. I celebrate by taking my two-year-old son with me to a beach in Sarasota with powder-fine white sand and clear turquoise water. Aiden, with his long blond curls and dark hazel eyes, looks just like I did at his age, except the part of him that hides beneath his blue swim diaper.

Though I am still obese, I've lost sixty pounds since my son's birth, and I have about a hundred and twenty to go. I am the healthiest and happiest I've ever been, though the last two years have been far different than I ever imagined they would be.

For the first year and a half of his life, Aiden called Ranger "Daddy," and Cordelia "Nina." I raised him with Alexandria as sister and brother, until her mother decided that Ranger wasn't a good enough father, and told us that we'd never see Alexandria again.

I will always remember the first time my son kissed me, when he was eleven months old and just learning to walk. I was slumped against the wall in the playroom he had shared with Alexandria for the past eight months, since we'd moved out of Cordelia's house. I was sobbing uncontrollably, grieving the loss of the daughter of my heart, because Ranger had no desire to get her back, and no amount of pleading with either of her parents made a bit of difference. Aiden was uncharacteristically quiet as he watched me cry. After a few long moments, he crawled into my arms and pulled himself to standing, taking my face in his tiny hands and looking solemnly into my eyes before leaning in to kiss it all better.

Ranger felt liberated by the loss of his daughter, and talked me into selling most of my belongings, including my car, so we could move with minimal necessities to Portland, Oregon.

We made a transitional move to a condo in Cocoa Beach first, thankfully, because a month after that move, Ranger decided he no longer wanted to be saddled down with Aiden or me.

That was the second time my son found me sobbing in the floor, and tried to kiss me all better.

I will always remember the look on my twenty-one-month-old son's face, that first night of the Florida Pagan Gathering Samhain 2010, when Ranger unloaded us and all of our belongings that I had managed to fit into his car at the festival site in the Ocala National Forest, and then just drove off, refusing to say goodbye to Aiden, never to contact us again. I could never forget how I felt two days later, as I went through my son's clothes, trying to figure out what I could discard because there wasn't enough room in my friend's car for everything; how scared I was that I wouldn't be able to find a job, or a home for us; how helpless I felt, and how I worried that if I couldn't keep a roof over our heads, that I might lose my son.

The next few months, as we hopped from couch to couch, I had to leave my one-year-old with a different babysitter every day as I desperately sought employment. The way he screamed and sobbed in terror, throwing himself at the door as I left...that will never leave me. I could never forget the way he clung to me when I returned for him, trembling, as if terrified that I would disappear if he let go.

Aiden and Pan met each other for the first time on New Year's Day 2011. Pan brought his girlfriend with him at that pivotal meeting, and a couple months later, she extended an invitation for Aiden and me to join her family in Southwest Florida.

Two months later, I can say without hyperbole that I'm the happiest I can ever remember being. I get to stay home with the kids and cook. Pan's girlfriend, Niki, has become like a sister

to me. She makes sure I have time to myself to write, and encourages me to pursue my dreams of making a living with my tarot and singing bowls. We celebrate our spirituality together with spontaneous rituals at the beach beneath the full moon. We have karaoke nights with her eleven-year-old daughter and six-year-old son in our living room, and family meetings every week where we come up with creative ways of living with respect, responsibility, and consideration, among other useful skills.

On my mother's thirtieth birthday, I was ten, my sister seven, our brother five, all of us at school on that Thursday in September, while Mom celebrated alone at home. Perhaps she watched TV, or enjoyed a long peaceful soak in the tub. After Dad came home that evening, we celebrated with her, giving her handmade cards. Dad served her favorite cake, red velvet with butter cream icing, and vanilla ice cream. Birthdays were always important in our family. It was the one day a year when we were treated as the precious gifts we were.

My mother's life was coming to an end by her thirtieth birthday, but my life is just beginning. I feel like I've only just become an adult. Thirty is the new twenty, as far as I'm concerned, and I'm going to love every second of my fourth decade on this earth, watching my son grow by leaps and bounds every day.

Aiden crouches in front of me in the sand, focusing all of his concentration on how moist and sugary it feels between his fingers. As I recline on my towel, the sun dries the saltwater from my skin, the warm breeze blowing my hair from my face. The scent of the sea reminds me of the way Aiden smelled the first time I held him in my arms, fresh from the miniature ocean within my womb. With my eyes closed, I relive the sensation of pressing my lips against my

son's downy hair as I cuddled his warm, wet, naked body to my bare chest for the first time, welcoming him to the world.

All of my dreams of motherhood are coming true. I am my son's fortress, and he is my anchor. I am his favorite jungle gym, and he is my favorite exercise equipment. Aiden thinks my belly makes an excellent trampoline; I think his belly makes an excellent surface for blowing raspberries.

Aiden has already made his first attempts at singing with me, chanting "akoo, attah" for "Hakuna Mattata." He brings me books to read to him, and recognizes and says all of the capital letters of the alphabet. He just started saying "Daddy" again, this time to his biological father, who drives a semi for a living, but makes time to play with his son the one day a week that he's home.

I have, unfortunately, lost my temper more than once, as I imagine all parents do sooner or later. At my worst, I've screamed at my son, telling him to shut up and go to sleep. I've thrown pillows at him, and given him looks that have made him burst into tears. Those are far from my proudest moments. But I console myself with the knowledge that I've never bruised his little body, and I've never left him to cry alone for more than a moment. My parenting skills are a work in progress, as is every other aspect of my life, but despite the many challenges we've faced in the last two years, my greatest victory is that I have successfully broken the chain of violence and abuse.

This morning, in our bedroom, as I typed away at my computer while Aiden played independently behind me, Aiden called me "Mom" for the first time. I whirled around to find him standing on the pile of boxes I needed to unpack, in the middle of our floor, smiling at me

with his arms open wide. “Mom,” he said again, smiling into my eyes, and some of the pieces of my heart knit themselves back together as I shut my laptop, scooping my baby into my arms, cheering him on and covering his face with kisses before burying my face in his long golden curls so he wouldn’t see my joyful tears and mistake them for tears of pain.

“Mom,” Aiden says, making my heart dance as I open my eyes and smile at my sandy baby. He points at the water, then grabs my hand and pulls me toward it. I follow him, pick him up when he reaches for the comfort of my arms, and wade into the gentle gulf water. A wave splashes over my hips, wetting Aiden’s legs, and his surprised shriek dissolves into delighted giggles. I laugh with him, leaning into the next wave as sunlight dances on the water around us, my son’s blond curls glowing like a golden halo.

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