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WOMAN OF DUST
AN EXODUS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2012

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Woman of Dust: An Exodus is a collection of themed non-fiction experiences and stories with themes, characters, and ideas that coincide deliberately and verge on the cohesiveness of memoir. The overarching themes of this collection are womanhood and coming of age. The stories examine the ways in which childhood crushes, current relationships, parenting, religion, and pets influence the growth of a child into an adult, in this case, a girl into a woman. They take individual moments, conversations, conventions, and thoughts and explore how they shaped the woman who now writes them.

Stories range in content from how the standards of a southern Baptist church raised a girl who was afraid to date, drink, or kiss, about the role of God in the narrator's private life, to stories that explore how cartoon Disney prince crushes turn into crushing on neighbor boys and classmates, discovering the narrator's current conceptions of love as different from her early conceptions and questioning the ways in which those conceptions came into existence in the first place. These stories look at the domestic implications of religious life that dictate specific roles for women in a marriage relationship, and how the narrator interprets these implications in terms of her own love and pending marriage. Still other essays investigate how a mother's overbearing fear of sex, men, and drugs drove one daughter to be a small town porn star and drove the other to complete abstinence, how gender conventions shape a girl's mind, and how family life sometimes contradicts the same conventions.

While the subject of each story is deeply feminine, revolving around a woman narrator and woman experiences, the content of these stories creates a very human experience, one outside the confines of gender. They are about one girl turned woman, from one perspective, and

about one life, but they are mostly about *being* human, about *growing*, and about the *ways* in which humans grow.

For my family

*I feel there is something unexplored about woman
that only a woman can explore.*

Georgia O'Keeffe

*You must live in the present,
launch yourself on every wave,
find your eternity in each moment.*

Henry David Thoreau

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EARTH CHILD

For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.

Genesis 3:19

I want to cover myself in earth, head to toe, in the thickest grittiest mud I can find. I want to take off my clothes, all of them, and dive into a dirt lake—mud bath. I want to grab a handful of the body clay, nature's beauty mask, Earth's cosmetics, and feel each grain grate across my skin—feel my pores bleed dirt—totally consumed. Covered. I want to bake my clay-coated self in the glowing warmth of the Florida afternoon sky. The most lovely blue sky imaginable—turquoise backdrop without a cloud in sight, sun shining bright—everything cliché and beautiful. That day is mine, and I want to bake in my shell like I did on the beach years ago, watch as the clay turns to pottery, dry, dusty, cracked. Feel the air move through the cracks to my new skin, watch the breeze blow my dust away. Then the washing. Water poured over me, a shower to wash away the clay, to cleanse me. And when I am done I will lay on my back in the sun to dry, feel the heat bristle in the hair on my arms as the water evaporates from me, no trace of my old skin, of the clay that cleansed me. I will feel my flesh glow strongest in the places that never see sun. A state of natural being. Drying. I am here, I am now. I am ready. I am whole. I am of the earth.

Home.

I have never been afraid of nature like I am afraid of people. My mother instilled in me a respectful caution of others that borders paranoia. I grew up believing that all strangers were kidnappers, rapists, and murderers, and I firmly believed that if I ever lost my mother in a store, I would die. She tried to instill this fear into me about nature—I should not wander outside alone,

even in my own backyard, because even here someone could be waiting for me. But when I was outside, I felt safe.

My favorite place to be when I was ten was the camphor tree that grew next to the rotting above-ground pool in my yard. This tree had easy access, but not so easy that my little sisters could follow me. The lowest branch was just above my natural reach, but if I jumped, I could grab it tightly with my soft fingers which always turned red from my endeavor. Once up on this branch, I climbed up into a V in the tree where a third branch, roughly the size of my waist then, functioned as a back rest. From my perch I could very nearly see the whole acre that composed my yard.

The tree itself had a rich scent all its own—a peppery perfume. During the spring this scent was strongest, wafting in the breeze the freshness of the berries it produced which later blossomed into little white flowers. The pepper accent came from the blossoms, new leaves folding outward toward the sun, stretching, growing, reaching. When I sat in my perch, my fingers picked at the bark, flaking back rough edges, picking scabs. New skin underneath. New odors. The bark was not like a pine tree, large bulky clusters of papery wood, molting skin. My tree was strong. I had to work at the little chips I cleared away, scraps of dirt and wood residue on my hands, a lingering scent I carried with me through the day. Under my nails.

In the ditch behind my house there was a mound, a hill like a giant ant nest where the pines were most dense. Their dropped needles cushioned the ground—a crunchy bed of prickles. This mound was my reserve. When my sisters and I played pioneers in my yard—the old green fort

our house—I sought refuge on the mound. It was there that I could find all the imagined spices, seasons, grains, and other products necessary for farming pioneers.

From the rot of a fallen tree I could procure ground cinnamon. There was a hollow in the underside of the fallen mass soft and malleable, and if I took a sharp stone to it, I could grind away a powdery red substance that resembled an eleven-year-old's perception of cinnamon. From the earth I could scavenge pepper—where I cleared away the bed of needles, a black and white coarse grit could be found, the perfect seasoning for imaginary venison stew. From the wheat colored weeds shooting up stalks of seed along the backside of the hill came grain for flour, with which I made no end of mud pies and bread loaves, topped with cinnamon. From the dark wild purple berries I made dye. The berries fell into my bucket with the lightest of thuds where they were mixed with water and beat with the largest flattest stone I could find. A fabric dye for the garments of monarchs.

And in the far corner of the yard, away from my hill, grew wild blackberries.

Beneath the wooden fort in my grandparents' backyard, was a mud hole. In this hole Stephanie and I made mud pies which we set in the hot summer sun to dry, cracking in the heat, bricks in an oven. I stopped when I heard my ten-year-old sister cry.

“I got mud on my shirt,” she said. “Mommy will be so mad at me.” She stood up and backed away from our recreation. The only thing to do was march herself inside and confess what she'd done. She would be in trouble for letting dirt touch her clothes. I walked half-way up to my grandparents' house with her before an idea suddenly hit me. I ran back out to the fort as fast as I could and smeared my hands with mud. When I looked up, I saw Steph watching me

from where I'd left her. I smiled at her and mashed my hands against my own white t-shirt leaving marks that resembled Indian war paint. If she was dirty, I would be too, and then maybe my mom wouldn't be mad. I ran back up to where Steph stood and laughed as she stood transfixed with horror at what I'd done.

“You got dirty on purpose,” she said, as if pinching herself away from a dream. “Why?”

“Now you won't get in trouble by yourself,” I said.

My child self saw an opportunity to garb myself in earth, and I seized it.

Tom's pond was the lake of my imagination. In it I saw not just the usual Florida wildlife—snakes, turtles, minnows, fish—but more. Beneath that black reflection was a world I had yet to discover. Forests of water weeds swimming with creatures I could only imagine, scales and gills and fins. I wanted to be beneath this surface. I imagined I could, like the boy Arthur in *The Sword and the Stone*, somehow become a fish for a day and swim the depths of this mysterious majestic moor.

Tom's pond was about the size of two tennis courts set side by side. A mud hole protected by overgrown weeds and unmowed grass, full only after a heavy rain. There were no gators, no unimaginable creatures. Just fish and an occasional snake. But I still imagined.

“You girls be safe over there,” my mother cautioned my sisters and me as we packed up our hunting gear—plastic green and blue nets, a fishing pole, and a yellow bucket for anything we might catch. “Stay out of the water.”

The water was exactly what I wanted to be in.

At the edge of the pond, I inched as close as I could without touching the water. I leaned forward, testing gravity. On my feet I wore a pair of my dad's goulashes, much too big for me. I could wade into the water a step or two, test the drop of the earth, its slant beneath the water. One step. Two. I couldn't see the bottom of my boots. Three. Over the edge of rubber against my leg I felt the cold trickle of water, down to my toes. The more I leaned the colder my feet got, but I was just getting ready. I inched my foot forward another step. Splash. I made the plunge.

When I surfaced I found myself much closer to the shore than I had hoped.

"Are you okay?" my sister yelled from the grass. I waded toward her, a little shocked at the rashness of my behavior.

"Yes," I said. I wiped the brown water from my eyes and noticed that my arms were streaked black with mud. My gray t-shirt clung to my newly developing body as I crawled onto the grass, panting.

"You're going to be in so much trouble," Steph said, pointing at my dripping self, trying to conceal a laugh.

"No," I said, "I won't. I fell in." This was precisely what I told my mother before she lectured me on the necessity of caution. There could have been a gator. A venomous snake. I should not just fall. But I did. I fell. There was nothing to be done about that except to shower and put on dry clothes.

I did not want to shower, even though my mother said I smelled like the pond, like rotting vegetation and standing water. To shower would wash away where I had been, the depth to which I had fallen. I *had* fallen, yes, but what I could not tell my mother, at age eleven, was that I

wanted to fall. That falling hadn't been an accident. That by falling, for a brief moment, I had been that much closer to the soft goopy flesh of the mud beneath the water, the Earth.

Before I got to high school, my family used to go camping. It was something we did at least once a year, usually during the cooler months—October, November, March, April, and May—Florida never really got cold. But sometimes we went in the summer, to the springs, state parks reserved for people like us, people who wanted to get away from life for a while and enjoy nature. On the first day we always got there early enough to get the site set up, spend some time at the spring, and scope things out. I was always bored during the setup process. Pitching tents, blowing up mattresses, storing the food—none of this interested me. I liked helping my dad pick a spot to hang the hammock—this involved trees, and if I picked the right ones, my view up to the sky would be clear, a portal to another atmosphere. But my favorite part of the first day was the scoping. Here, at this moment, in this new and unfamiliar place, I was allowed to explore.

My sisters and I were in charge of gathering firewood and roasting sticks for hotdogs and marshmallows later that night. Finding the best roasting stick and contributing the most firewood were unspoken competitions between me and my sisters. To do these things and to do them well was to show that we were children of the woods, wild things gone back to our roots. While we searched for the perfect stick (it had to be long enough to maintain a respectable distance from the fire, broad and graspable at one end, thin at the other, of a wood that could be sharpened by a knife, Daddy's knife, without shredding, and be able to withstand even the licking of blue flames without instantly turning to ash, like palmetto—oak was preferable) and the perfect firewood (chunky branches or stumps with meat on them, not rotted and dusty with termites, or wet with

rain; kindle, scraps of bark, twigs from the ground, pine needles, dried leaves, pine cones, anything that would burn), I dropped off the radar into the netting of the woods around our campsite. It surprised me that my mother allowed us to go off into the woods alone, unsupervised, with just each other. At home she kept us in close sight, warned us against going too far from home, of strangers by the names of Murderer or Rapist, or Kidnapper. Here, at a known campsite, I thought one of these men would be most likely to hide, knowing that there would be children nearby, in the woods, away from the watch of their relaxing vacationing parents. Here, a predator had prey. But my mom let us go. Perhaps she didn't think of danger as real here in our protected campsite. Perhaps she did, and my dad was actually the one who persuaded her to let us go, not thinking of danger. Perhaps we were never as far as I felt from their protection and observation—maybe I just imagined them into oblivion, miles away, myself secluded among the walls of trees. Either way, I felt free, and in my freedom I found peace.

“I found a roasting stick,” my older sister said a few trees over. I hadn't found one yet. I could hear the steps of my younger sister near where Steph's voice sounded, and I turned away from it and walked.

I walked for a seemingly long time before I found it, quiet. The brittle breaking of dried leaves beneath careless feet faded away with the voices of my sisters, evidence of my solitude. In their place, the hum of cicadas high in the trees, a uniquely Florida sound. Wings or legs or other body parts coming together, nothing like the song of a cricket. Cicadas produce a low vibration, a kind of rattle that is both recognizable as the product of a physical existence and unrecognizable, indistinguishable from the pulse of blood in your ears drawn out by the summer heat, the rustle of leaves in the highest branches, the crisp crunch of dead leaves blanketing the

ground beneath your feet, a symphony of percussion with no distinct rhythm. In this song I got lost. I wanted to disappear into this noise that embedded my location. I thought about walking, just walking, with no direction in mind, until I didn't exist, until I became part of this world. I imagined myself not as leaving my family, but as never having belonged to them, not belonging to anyone. Here I felt home. Here I could stay. I wouldn't die—death was not part of my equation—but I would cease to be me, to be part of a human world to which I did not want to belong.

I had lost myself in an imagining of such an existence when I was called back into reality.

“Lacey,” my mother yelled somewhere to my left. I looked in the direction of her voice and found her green sweatshirt moving aimlessly through the trees away from me. Without thinking I moved toward her, a silent answering of her call. “Lacey,” she yelled again, louder as I got closer. I broke into a run and noticed, for the first time, the long straight and narrow stick in my sweaty right hand, the dirty kindle in my other, hands black. I must have picked them up while I was wondering. “Lacey,” I heard a third time, “where are you?”

“Here,” I yelled as I closed the distance between my mother and me, widening the one between me and my thoughts, my evaporation. “I'm right here.”

When I learned in grade school that Indians used mud to draw out the sting of something like an insect bite, I rushed outside and found the nearest ant bed so I could try this remedy, this healing of the body by the earth. I found a small white sand mountain protruding from the ground and brushed its peak with the tip of my bare toe. Immediately the ants came forth and I dangled the guilty toe close to the unhappy insects, let it hover until one soldier found it and attacked. The

pain shot through my foot with instant satisfaction. My plan was working. I brushed the ant aside and watched the tiny red welt rise from the surface of my sun tanned dirty foot, right between the toes. In a matter of minutes my foot was on fire. I sought a patch of dirt in the far corner of the yard, out past the pool, just before the green fort. Between two pines the grass did not grow, leaving instead a patch of shaded cool black earth. This was not Florida sand, but compacted dirt. I cupped my hand and dipped it in the pool water as I passed—I could not make mud without water. Past the pool I scooped up a small handful of earth and mixed it with the water until I got a thick muddy paste. This paste I rolled around in my hands for a minute, testing the consistency. Just right. I formed the mud into a small ball, a skill transferred from the making of mud pies, and patted it smooth across the bite, an earthen Band-Aid. The mix was cool against my hot irritated skin, cooler even than the ground beneath my feet. The grit of the dirt appeased the itch growing between my toes. Instantly, the sting was gone.

“Beach sand is a natural exfoliate,” I said to my younger sister, Christin. We came with the family, a beach day, but we were the only two down at the water. I dipped my white tipped toe—a home French pedicure—into the rising wave, let the tide wash over my feet.

“What does that mean?” Christin asked, imitating my movement. We sat just beyond the reach of the waves, on the natural line that forms between wet sand and wetter sand, our toes the only part of us the ocean could touch.

“It gets rid of dead skin,” I said. I sunk my hand into the soft silt sprinkle of shells that construct natural Florida beach sand, raised it above my splayed legs, and let it fall. With my muddied hand I spread the natural mask around and scrubbed. As the next wave washed up I

inched down the shore to reach the water and splashed away the sand, then scooted backward to Christin. “See,” I said as I ran my now clean hand over the smooth red spot I had created. She did the same.

“It’s so soft,” she said, touching her own leg for comparison. “I want my whole body to feel like that.” I did too.

Without another word we picked up a handful of sand and shell and smeared our bodies until we were coated from the neck down, except for under our suits. It was not a long process. We pushed the mud between our toes and fingers, over our knees, up our stomachs, into our belly buttons.

“Can you get my back?” I asked.

“If you get mine.”

I nodded and pulled up my tangled brown hair off my neck to give her full access. I stared off into the blue sky and watched clouds drift as she dripped cold salty earth down my neck, across my shoulder blades, under the straps that tied my suit to my body.

“My turn,” she said when she was done. I picked up a handful of mud and smeared it down her white back, up to the hairline where she, like me, had lifted her hair out of the way. When I was done we sat back and admired our work. Only our faces were bare.

“How long do we wait?” she asked.

I looked at my feet, the first thing I coated, then my arms, the second. The sun had begun to harden the new external layer like clay, like the cosmetic clay face masks sold in stores. The mud hardened and cracked, giving it the appearance of dinosaur skin. “Until we look like that,” I said and pointed to my wrinkled foot.

“Old?” she asked. We laughed.

“Dry.”

The process took a few minutes, but the baking felt good, calming. We had created around our bodies an earthen shell, a shadow of our origins, to create something new. I raised my arm to test my new skin. It crumpled instantly.

“Done,” I said. We stood and walked toward the wash of white caps crashing on the blue. At a touch the mud gave way beneath the cleansing rinse of water. We immersed ourselves under the waves, an instant silencing of the screaming seagulls and laughing kids. Just the rush of water, the breaking away of old skin, and, with the resurfacing, a kind of birth.

WATERS

One Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Ephesians 4:5

With the first toe your breath stops short, a sharp inhale. After that, you barely notice the icy cold. The adrenaline keeps you from noticing. You are charged. You are ready for this. You are only eleven.

You are.

Just moments before you are at the forefront of the church in a single small plain-walled room with your mother, about to walk up the rough plank stairs that lead to the baptismal water.

From behind the thinly paneled walls you hear the congregation sing “Amazing Grace,” but it’s not a sweet sound. It is off key, off beat, off.

You have a few brief moments to yourself to prepare for this choice you’ve made.

“Are you ready?” your mother asks, touching your shoulder lightly. You nod. “I’ll be right here when you come back.”

You look up the dark plank stairs, and start to climb.

Up. Like Jacob’s ladder.

Up. To Zion.

Up. Down to the river to pray.

You’re at the top. Looking down. A pool of icy water.

You descend.

In the middle of the pool you meet the pastor. He told you earlier what to expect. A brief intro—*this young woman has come before us tonight to be baptized, not to be saved, for man cannot be saved by works alone, but to profess her faith publicly.* A few questions—*do you believe that you have been elected by God to be one of His children? Yes. Do you believe that there is only one God, He sent His only begotten son to die on the cross for your sins? Yes.* Then the dunking—*I hereby baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, dead in your sin, *gurglegurglegurgle,* raised to walk in the newness of life.* Then it's over. It is what you expect. What you know.

What you don't know is that you have just made, in the eyes of the church, a covenant to never leave. This is your home now. Here you must stay. You've heard the Bible stories, and you believe them without any questions. But that isn't enough. You must dress according to Biblical standards—no tattoos, piercings are questionable, no immodest clothing (anything above the knees or below the collar bone). You must love your neighbor. Honor your parents.

This means that in a few years, when you get to high school and fashion begins to matter, your parents will argue with you about how thin you are allowed to pluck your eyebrows, when you are old enough to wear makeup, and how many piercings you may have.

“But Mom,” you will say, “*So-and-so* plucks her eyebrows like this,” as you indicate the pencil thin lines where bushels used to be.

“Well, you aren't *So-and-so*, are you?” she will say.

You will try on a pair of denim shorts that are just above mid-thigh.

“Why do you think all of your shorts have to be so short?” she will ask. “Why can’t you dress like the *So-and-so’s* at church?” The *So-and-so’s* are always a respectable Amish-fashioned church family when *she* mentions them.

You won’t say that you aren’t the *So-and-so’s*, because that would be dishonoring your parents. But you will think it.

All this you do not yet know. All this you do not expect. You are eleven. You haven’t begun to consider these things.

You think you understand what the baptism represents. This is your choice. Your parents are proud. You think that you can do this. You think, you can.

You are in college when you wear a denim mini-skirt out of the house one night for a date. Your dad will not say a word, and your mother will take one look at you, frown, and resume slicing the vegetables for dinner. She won’t look at you when you say goodbye. Her arms will go limp when you give her a hug. She won’t respond when you say I love you. You will say it anyway, each time with a little more emphasis. *I love you. I love you. I love you.* Until you feel it no longer makes a difference, because without the same interpretation of God and love that she has, it means nothing. Empty words that become a pleasantry, haunted always by the uncertainty of sincerity—vacant and hollow, like the sound beneath the stairs that you climb up to the baptistery.

SANCTUARY

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I grew up, I put away childish things.

I Corinthians 13:11

Meadow of turf, flora, clean air. These are the things I stumbled upon, the place that enveloped me like a blanket, a cocoon, a wrapping warm mantle where I was alone. An acre or so of field, a miniature valley, surrounded by the cologne of fruitful pines—aromatic.

A zephyr danced above the harvest colored stalks of wild grass where gold and pink flowers floated over shades of bright and murky greens that mixed fiercely and mysteriously with blades of yellow, and caressed the slopes of my sanctuary until they reached out of view, into the blue gem called sky. There was an echo of absence—of birds, of screams of children playing down the street, of the breath of another being—a void, a quiet place. Here I could think, hear my own breath—heartbeat.

But terror lay within me—I wanted no one to know of my haven. Sharing this paradise was unimaginable. Another body would taint this perfection. I felt the need to preserve it in this natural state. I stole myself away, back to the world of others, to my family, home, careful to lock the memory of the place where no one might ever pry it from my mind. I hid the memory so well that years later I could not know if my realm was one of physical attainment or simply imagined—a dream.

Ghosts were my playmates in Texas.

“Do you see the ghosts?” I asked Christin one night, lying on my back on the furry brown carpet beneath the living room fan. Star gazing beneath a sky of popcorn ceiling.

“Yes,” she answered.

When I was six, a year before my family moved to Texas, I found my older sister, Stephanie, standing at our front door, face pressed gently against the screen door, just watching our street.

“What are you looking at?” I asked her.

“The air,” she replied.

I watched and listened for a moment before realizing that there was a lack of sound on our street.

“I don’t see it,” I said. “Why can’t I see the air too?”

“You will one day,” she said in her seven-year-old wisdom. I watched again, harder this time. She walked away.

I sat staring out the door for several minutes after she left, trying to see the air. The white iron trim that bordered the screen door gave my hands a resting place while the tip of my nose pressed into the black screen. The single small oak in our front yard didn’t move, and stagnant Florida air hung around the branches. No cars rolled down our street. When my five-year-old sister, Christin, approached me and asked what I was doing, I replied in the same manner that Stephanie had replied to me. “I’m watching the air.”

“Oh,” was all Christin said. No questions. She stood beside me, short blond hair springing from her head in every direction. Her long *Hunchback of Notre Dame* pajama t-shirt with the character of Esmeralda on the front hung down to her knees.

“When you’re older you’ll see it too,” I said. In the minutes that had passed since Stephanie left the door, I imagined that I had grown old enough to see what she saw, to hear, touch, smell, feel, know the air.

When my family moved to Texas I watched the air. There wasn’t a screen door on the two-story house where we lived, so I looked out my window. There wasn’t actually anything to see, because air isn’t visible, but in the brown-walled living room I imagined I could see figures spinning around the ceiling in time with the fan.

Our imaginary friends were born.

Stephanie never saw them. Maybe she stopped looking, or forgot. Maybe she thought we were being childish. Maybe she didn’t care. But Christin and I did. We took them outside, swinging from branch to branch in the overgrown hedges that lined the back of the fence. This was our secret spot, our haven. Sometimes we left the ghosts to play by themselves while we swung on the swing-set.

We each kept a portfolio of our friends. It started with just one or two drawings that we made with Crayola markers on pieces of printer paper swiped from the computer desk, carefully clipped on a clipboard, our portable lives. We each drew Casper-esque figures, sometimes male, sometimes female, accessorized with bows, hats, dresses, and shirts. Never shoes. Ghosts don’t have feet.

Then we got carried away. Beneath the Texas sun, in the black mud and grass of our yard, the ghost family grew. There were brothers and sisters, cousins, friends—never parents. They played in hedges, they overtook the swing-set, played in the Little Tikes house with the green roof and bright red plastic door.

One day they disappeared. Perhaps we banished them. Or perhaps we outgrew their company. But they were gone. We lost interest. Stopped drawing. Stopped sharing images of our friends.

“Do you still see your ghosts?” I asked Christin outside in a backyard tree, as high in the thorny limbs as I could get.

“No,” she said.

I was fed by my imagination, by stories and books. I had imaginary friends. I ate clovers. I became everything that I pretended I was, inhabited by my curiosity—I did not just pretend—I became. I became because my imagination was an expression of my truest self. I was a strange child. I did unusual things,

Why do I feel the need to say I was a strange child? I am fascinated with the strangeness of children. So many people that I know say *I was a strange little child*—as if that clarifies why they did what they did, why they became the person they are today—as if it rationalizes their current existence. Who I am now is different than who I was then, but the strangeness has not gone away. It has merely been reshaped, reformed, masked by adulthood. I was no more strange than any other child. My strangeness merely made me who I am—a writer, a woman, a sister and daughter and wife-to-be—all things practical and real.

When I was a child, I could be anything.

There was a cassette tape I used to listen to called “Panda Lullaby” on which there were many children’s songs, songs sung by a man with a deep bass voice, accompanied by a guitar. Songs that were whimsical, about being a panda, about being obedient (o-bee-dee-ent). My

favorite was the one about what I could be when I grew up—*When I grow up I wanna be a Maple tree, live high above the ground, so the whole world I can see*—verses that overlap each other so that by the end of the song, there’s a whole list of things I could be. *Rocket ship, or a fishing pole, a fire truck, or a Maple tree, when I grow up*. Each of these things represents something that people strive for—adventure, stories, helping others, growing—but then they were just a song. I loved the song for its rhythm and pace, but I never understood how I could be a rocket ship, or a fishing pole, fire truck, or Maple tree. I couldn’t imagine being a stationary being, or an inanimate object. I wanted to be alive, to move.

In 1999, a year after we moved to Texas, after the ghosts, my family moved back to Florida where I found adventures in books. I read all of the *Nancy Drew* collection. A few Frank Peretti books. Some other small novels in between. Then I read *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I found a new world.

I read C.S. Lewis just after our move. Our yellow-sided house was still new to me, the acre yard full of unusual plants and creatures—an easy place for an imaginary world.

I climbed every tree in my new yard, went behind the wire fence and waded through the swampy ditch full of rain water, trekked across fallen trees, and pined away hours on Ant Island, a little mountain of earth that resembled an ant mound. I waited. I sat quietly, listening to the birds, insects and squirrels. Wishing for the sounds of Narnia. For something unidentifiably new that I might immediately recognize only by its newness. Waiting for this new world of imagination to find me. I imagined adventures with Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—I was appalled when I read that Susan forgot Narnia, said that it was an imaginary game the children

played—and I begged the universe to let me take her place. I would not forget that Narnia was real.

There was a cabinet in our house where my mother kept all of our school supplies. It was old, stained a deep brown, with chipped flowers painted on the front. It had a rusted wrought iron lock with a rusted key. It was so full of supplies that I could not crawl inside as Lucy did with the wardrobe. Instead, I stood in front of it, locked it, whispered a silent prayer, ignored the voice in the back of my head that whispered *it cannot happen*, unlocked it, opened the squeaky door, and stood disappointed, staring at a cabinet full of pencils, markers, and paper. No Narnia. If I wished hard enough, imagined long enough, I could make it real. I could pretend.

I pretended for other ideas of magic, too.

I never liked the movie *Matilda*, but I loved the premise. An only daughter rejected by her family who channels her anger into psychic powers. Every kid's dream.

One night, after watching the movie with our family, Stephanie and I retreated to our shared bedroom and placed two TY Beanie Babies on a folded up green and white checkered futon.

“Do you think it will work?” I asked. I wasn't convinced, but I would try.

“I don't know,” she shrugged. Her long blond hair hung down over her back. From behind we looked identical. Only a year-and-a-half apart. We hunched over and stared long and hard at our targets, squinting, scrunching our noses, mouthing the words “come on, you can do it, come on.” Nothing happened.

“Maybe we have to be angry,” I said. “Matilda was angry the first time she used her powers.”

“That’s good,” Steph said. “Think of something that made you angry.”

I don’t know what Steph thought. I don’t remember what I thought about either. If I was angry with my parents for something, I probably thought of that. But I know that I tried so hard to be angry, to move the unicorn toy in front of me. I know that it didn’t work.

“Maybe we should close our eyes,” she suggested. We did.

Seconds passed. Angry thoughts. I might have held my breath. I opened my eyes.

“I think it moved!” I said. She opened her eyes, looked at the two toy creatures before us, and agreed.

We passed a length of time in this fashion. Nothing happened. The toys never moved. I knew it then as well as I know it now, but I wanted desperately for it to be real, for anything special to happen to me. I never believed the toys would move. Maybe that was why it didn’t work. I didn’t believe. Maybe that’s why I couldn’t get to Narnia too—somewhere, deep down, I knew it wouldn’t work. It wasn’t real. As much as I wanted to believe, I couldn’t.

I still don’t.

On Christmas day the family sat on the floor in the front room. The carpet was wrapped in paper, patterns of snowflakes, snowmen, and other festive icons—as close as it gets to snow in Florida. Mommy sat up on the whit-leather-couch-gone-gray from years of sitting on it and not cleaning it. Daddy sat closest to the tree, the distributor of gifts. My sisters and I sat in a V shape away from Daddy, each with our pile of goods stored carefully by our side. Behind us, the cat jumped into piles of crunchy paper packaging, hiding in boxes and stalking tape.

I was in full holiday mode. School had been out for three weeks—college the furthest thing from my mind. No homework. No assigned reading. Just me, my family, and all the Christmas cookies I could eat. There would be a Christmas ham in a couple of hours, accompanied by sides of green beans cooked in bacon grease, mashed potatoes and homemade gravy, cranberry salad (a veritable conglomeration of cranberries, apples, pineapples, and other fruits and nuts with a simultaneously soft and crunchy texture, the dry bitterness of cranberry paired with the juicy natural sugars of pineapple), homemade crescent rolls, and orange fluff (an orange colored and flavored tapioca based pudding more the consistency of cool whip), a family tradition. And after that would be dessert—two fresh-from-the-can-pumpkin-pies topped with cool whip, two pecan pies, also topped with cool whip (or ice-cream), dripping with the sticky sweetness of corn syrup, and, of course, a made-from-scratch chocolate chip cheesecake, complete with a homemade graham cracker crust, smothered in a shell of hardened chocolate. This was what awaited me. This was what was on my mind when Daddy handed me a small flat box wrapped in Christmas red paper, a label on top with my name as the designated recipient.

I knew this kind of box. Only one thing came in a box this small—jewelry. I didn't shake the box or hold it up to my ear. I tore off the paper and popped the tape from the sides. Inside, beneath a layer of gauze-thin cotton protection was a necklace. It wasn't fancy. No flashy metal or precious stones. It had a leather strap in place of a chain, and hanging from the strap was a little silver pendent in the shape of a coin. Around the border of this circle was the phrase, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, nothing shall be impossible to you." In the center of these words was a bubble the size of a small bead, and inside that bubble was empty.

“It’s a mustard seed,” Mommy said. She was excited to give me this gift, to remind me of the profession I made years ago. It was a neat piece, but I would not wear it. It wasn’t my style.

“Are you sure?” I asked. I squinted at the empty bubble. I knew mustard seeds were small, but I didn’t think they were microscopic. “I think mine is missing the seed.”

“Let me see,” she said. She extended her arm from her position on the couch. I handed my gift over for her examination. “You’re right. I can’t believe it.” Christin and Rebecca were in hysterics. Daddy chuckled as he sifted through the remaining stack of gifts. “I’m going to return it and get you one that actually has a seed in it.”

“Guess I don’t have enough faith,” I said, joining in Christin’s and Rebecca’s laughter. Mommy didn’t find it humorous, as if this necklace, this seed, was a symbol of my faith. Daddy handed Christin and Rebecca each a gift, and we moved on. The incident was forgotten.

But I thought about a night several years ago, sometime during my sophomore year of high school. On this night, I sat on my bed, on top of the denim comforter that accented the soft pastel pink walls, and cried. There wasn’t a particular catalyst for my behavior. I was suddenly and inexplicably afraid, not of the dark, or of monsters under my bed, but of myself. Totally unprompted, I had begun to see my life as uninspired—I was not a devout Christian. I went to church three times a week, I said a prayer before each meal, a blessing of the food, and I tried to witness to my friends—an inconceivably difficult task in a high school atmosphere—but I did not feel the love and inspiration I knew my brothers and sisters in Christ had—I did not feel belief. I did these things because they were routine, expected requirements. To be a good Christian I must bear fruit, show signs of my faith. But an apple cannot grow on a barren tree.

After tucking in my two younger sisters for bed, my parents entered my room to hug and kiss me goodnight. I was enthralled in my terror.

“Lacey,” my mom said, sliding onto the corner of my bed, “what’s wrong?”

“I’m scared,” I said. “The Bible says that Christians are supposed to have trials, that they will be tested.” I sniffed and wiped my eyes with my hands. “I’m not being tested. I don’t have trials.” I looked up in the dark at my parents’ silhouettes. My dad stood in the doorway. “What if I’m not saved?”

What followed was a jumbled mess of emotional encouragement, comfort, and love. If I were not truly saved, I wouldn’t be concerned about my lack of struggle, they said. The fact that I was actively worried about my salvation was a good sign of faith, of belief, they said, and did I know how much they loved me? They said goodnight and went to bed, and our conversation and my fear sat like an old book on a dusty shelf, untouched.

I never got a new necklace. I don’t believe in imaginary worlds, or magic powers, and I wonder sometimes if I have faith the size of any seed, in anything. But if imagination is the truest expression of myself, and I believe that it is, do I repress my own existence by not believing? I must be running—afraid to live—afraid to fail—afraid to try. Is this what adulthood is, a constant fear of being real?

I sat in a philosophy class once during my undergrad in which the professor asked why people do certain things, like turn up the music in the car when they are alone, or surround themselves with people, even if those people are people they hate, or engage in activities that they know will not end well. No one really knew. “You do these things,” he said, “because you

do not want to be alone with yourself. You do not want to hear your own thoughts, so you drown them out. Why?" No one answered. "Because you are afraid of *what you might think*. You are subconsciously afraid of your own mind." I am afraid of what I might not believe.

I have repressed my childhood self, the imaginative girl who could make anything real. I wanted to be grown up, and growing up has made me less *me*. I have tucked myself away, avoided my thoughts and imaginings. I am running from myself. I don't want to catch myself in a moment of clarity, for the terror I might find could be too real.

In the year that I lived in Texas, Christin and I played against the side of our two-story brick house, walking along the clay-like dirt mounds that pushed up against the base of the structure. Clovers grew up against the wall, melting into soft grass further from the shade of our house. We had just watched *Alice in Wonderland*, the Disney version.

"Maybe if I eat this clover," said Christin, "I'll grow." Her logic was simple. Mushrooms made Alice grow, so why shouldn't clovers make us grow? If we had been able to find mushrooms in our own yard, we probably would have eaten those instead. But since we lacked mushrooms, clovers would work just fine.

"Let's try it," I agreed.

I was eight years old. Christin was six.

She picked up a single clover and ate one of its three leaves. Her soft round brown eyes locked on mine for a brief moment as we anticipated an acceleration of growth toward the sky. Nothing happened.

“It’s salty,” she said. She licked her lips playfully, as if there were residual salt to be found. I plucked another clover and followed suit.

There was not much flavor in the single leaf on my tongue. It was soft and light, nothing like a lettuce leaf. No crunch. I wondered why rabbits liked clovers.

I stepped up against the brick wall and stood straight.

“Measure me,” I said to Christin. She walked over and stuck her finger against the wall where my head reached as she took another bite of her clover. I backed away and turned around. “Don’t move your hand,” I said. I pulled another leaf from my clover and chewed. This time there was more salt, which I savored briefly before swallowing. I stepped back up against the wall. “Measure me again,” I said.

She did as I instructed and when I stepped away we both stared in amazement—her hand now marked a place about an inch above my last mark. Our eyes grew wide.

“You grew,” she whispered, as if saying it too loudly would make the magic go away. I stared in silence at the brick wall. If I could grow an inch with just two leaves, how much more could I grow with whole clovers?

Christin popped another clover leaf in her mouth and chewed and swallowed.

“Do me,” she pleaded, bouncing up and down, still quite. Her thin blonde hair stuck to the sweat on her neck in the Texas heat. She raced toward me and hurled herself at the wall, catching herself with her palms, round face contorted in laughter as she straightened up, backside to the bricks. I ran my hand along the top of her head until it met the wall, marking her spot. She stepped away and chomped down another clover as she eyed the place where my hand was, then returned to her post. I measured again.

“You shrunk,” I said. I had followed the same procedure the second time for her as I did the first, but she had not grown. My hand against the wall showed that she had indeed become an inch shorter.

There are unspoken expectations that children will grow, grow into adults, and that means certain things are not done. Adults do not have imaginary friends, eat clovers, or believe in other worlds. These things are for children. Children observe and imitate the adults around them until they become a different person. A person no longer capable of the magic of childhood.

“Remember how Alice had the two mushrooms?” she asked. I nodded. “One made her taller, the other made her shrink.” We looked at the clovers at our feet, a whole salad to be tested.

“How do we tell which ones make us grow and which ones don’t?” I asked.

And in all her infinite wisdom she smiled, shoved a clover in her mouth and said, “I don’t know, but we have plenty to try.” We got straight to work.

As an adult, I do not feel that I am allowed to be strange the way a child is. My imagination is suppressed. My imagination is an expression of my truest self. What am I? What have I become?

Rocket ship, or a fishing pole, a fire truck, or a Maple tree.

MOTHER FEAR

Whom shall I fear?

Psalm 27:1

“You ready?” Brian asks. We’re about to sit down to watch a movie together. I sit on the love seat, under the small lamp that hurts my eyes—it’s too close and too bright while the TV is glowing—I have my water, my phone, and my lip balm on the coffee table next to me, no coaster beneath the plastic bottle.

“Yeah,” I say, standing as he sits down next to me. He puts his hand on the back of my leg.

“Where are you going?”

“To get my blanket,” I say. I leave the room and walk down the hall to my bedroom and flip on the light. In the corner next to my bed is the pink fuzzy blanket Brian bought me for my twenty-second birthday. It has a blue trim, and four big happy monkey faces down the center. I grab it, all wadded up, turn out the light, and go back down the hall to Brian. He laughs as I sit down with the ball of pink fuzz in my lap. “What?” I ask. I fluff out the blanket till it covers my feet.

“Just you and your blankets,” he says.

“What about me and my blankets?” I ask. He slides his arm behind my back and pulls me in to him. I turn off the lamp. We are left in the blue light of the TV.

“It’s like eighty degrees in here,” he says, “and you’re wrapped up in a fuzzy blanket. What am I going to do with you?” I’m wearing yoga pants that are actually capris and a tank top.

Not exactly winter attire. And he's right, it's not cold—it's the middle of June, and the thermostat is set at seventy-seven.

"I'm not particularly cold," I say. "It's a comfort thing." I've explained this before.

"What, you don't feel safe with me?" he teases.

"Yes." I know that I look as if I'm afraid that monsters will bite my toes. When I was five, this is exactly what I worried about. My mom took me to a fair in town at night. My dad must have been working late, because he wasn't with us.

"Stay close," my mom ordered, "and don't let go of my hand. There are all sorts of weirdoes at places like this."

I'm not sure why we went. She never liked fairs, mostly because of the carnie crowd they attract. They made her uncomfortable. Maybe I begged her to go, drawn in by the bright and flashing lights that accompany carnivals, meant to entice little children. Lots of music, people and little blinking colored bulbs. Even a small local fair can seem imposingly large to a child.

Because I was aware of my mother's fears, I became immediately alert. I tightened my sweaty grip on her hand and looked around.

"Don't let go of me," she warned before we arrived. "It would be so easy for someone to just snatch you and run away."

As we passed the giant spinning Strawberry and the Ferris wheel, my eyes caught something. Just inches away from me stood a man in jeans and a black shirt. He was anywhere from sixteen to thirty—older than me. I don't remember much about the individual man. He was blonde. Perhaps a little scruffy. What I remember is his shirt, specifically the back. On the back of his black t-shirt was a lizard-like creature. It was green and scaly with red demon eyes. Its tail

was pointed, not forked, and it had thin leathery wings. I knew it was not a dragon. It was a demon. An evil demon. When the man wearing the demon lizard shirt turned and faced my direction, I was afraid, not just of the lizard, but of him.

The fair was small enough that I saw him multiple times throughout the rest of our evening. I watched him carefully. I expected the worst.

When I got home that night and went to bed, I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes I saw the demon. He had left the back of the man who wore him. When I closed my eyes, this demon was in my room, crawling up the side of my top bunk-bed, by my face. Under my blankets.

The blanket I had over me was small, handmade by my great grandmother. On the front was a large picture, a scene from Winnie-the-Pooh, with Pooh floating away on a balloon, Piglet holding on to his hand, followed by Tigger, Rabbit, and Christopher Robin. They were floating away, an adventure. On the back of the blanket, surrounded by yellow fabric, were stitched all the main characters—Pooh, Piglet, Eeyore, Tigger, Gopher, Rabbit, Kanga and Roo, and Owl.

Instinctively, I pulled the edges of my blanket as close to me as I could. I tucked them under my body from my neck to my toes. Every time I moved, even just a little, some part of me was exposed. I tugged, pulled, and tried not to move until at last I was totally cocooned. I laid there and took a deep breath, through my mouth, which I promptly closed. A new panic set in—it could crawl into my mouth. While I slept. I sealed my lips and breathed only through my nose. Beneath my blanket I started to sweat, and I needed to pee. I agonized over whether or not I should go to the bathroom, but I couldn't move. I felt the warm trickle of water leak down my

blue and white checkered pajama pants and into the bed. Still, I could not move. I was wet with sweat and urine, breathing only through my nose.

In this way, I fell asleep.

This habit has not left me. At twenty-three years old, I must still be cocooned when I sleep. I avoid scary movies because I know the effect they will have on me.

I watched an episode of CSI with Brian over a year ago. In this episode, the villain is a contortionist with one blue and one brown eye. He wears a black leather body suit that zips over his face, all the way to his eyes. Because of this suit, he leaves no DNA evidence. At one crime scene, he escapes by fitting himself through an incredibly small window. At another he is discovered to have lived, unnoticed, under the bed of his victim for at least a week before the murder.

After we watched this episode together, I would not use Brian's bathroom. Instead, when at his house, I used his sister's. He noticed my aversion and asked what it was about.

"There's a window in your bathroom," I said, that simple. He made the connection.

"Really?" He laughed. "Did you go home last night and look under your bed for monsters too?" He was teasing, but when I didn't answer, he stopped. "That really bothered you?"

"Yes," I said. It did. And when I went home the night we watched this episode, after I checked under my bed, in my window seat, and all the other places I thought a contortionist might hide, I wrapped myself tightly in my blankets, tucked in all the edges so that I couldn't feel a draft through the sheets, and told myself that as long as I was covered, I was safe.

I know there are not monsters under my bed. No furry fanged beast, no Star Wars-like creature. I avoid movies like *The Grudge* to cap my imagination with regards to horror—it does

enough damage without the influence of film. I avoid even more the ones based on real events, such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. I avoid them because I fear no number of blankets will ward off the horrors they might inflict on me. I don't know why blankets work. Don't know why these monsters, whatever shape they take, bother me. Even Brian's two-and-a-half year old godson has dealt with his demons better than I have.

Brian was babysitting his godson, Ryland, one afternoon at the apartment where Ryland lives. They had made a mess playing with toys and were cleaning up when Brian discovered a toy monster stuffed under the mattress of Ryland's toddler sized bed.

"Hey buddy," he said to Ryland, "what's this?" He held up the toy for Ryland to see.

"Don't," Ryland said. He took the toy from Brian and placed it back under the mattress. "That's the monster under my bed." That simple, as if Brian should know such a thing. Brian later asked Ryland's mom if the toy was a strategy they had used to keep Ryland from being afraid of monsters. She said no. That was all him. What would this two-and-a-half year old think of me and my blankets? Perhaps I should hide a monster under my bed too.

I sit on the couch with Brian and remember these things. We are about to watch our movie, and I am wrapped head to toe in my blanket, my comfort. When I'm with Brian, I don't need to be tightly sealed. I still like to be covered, but I am not as anxious about drafts. But when he leaves, when the movie is over and he goes home for the night, it's just me and my blanket.

My mother never tells me how old she was when it happened. Or why her mom wasn't there to stop it, to stop her father. Or if her mom even knew, in what ways my mother held her own mother accountable.

She's never been close to her father, but when he dies, she goes to his funeral, and she cries.

I don't know all the details. She mentions it casually, in passing conversation, in high school lectures about boys and sex and marriage. As if I already know what it means, what her father did to her. As if her hurt is mine by default, having come from her body, being an extension of her.

But I don't. Don't know at age twelve what rape means. Don't know at age fourteen what the act of rape entails, the physical nature of it. Or at age eighteen, why her father did it, raped his own daughter, physically hurt her in a way no father should ever hurt his daughter. At age twenty, what it did to her, what lasting affects her father's rape has on her psyche.

But I see it every day.

All my friends growing up are girls. She doesn't trust boys.

"Can I go over to Steven's house?" I ask from the kitchen door. I am in high school. It is a nightly ritual. Come home from school, finish homework, and hang out with Steven and friends.

"Are you guys dating?" she asks in response. "You spend a lot of time with him."

"No, we're just friends," I reply. That is the truth. "Am I not allowed to have guy friends?"

The kitchen smells of chocolate chip cookies, fresh from the oven.

"Guys don't want to be just friends. They only want one thing," she says as she stirs a pot of brewing tea, then wipes her hands on her green and white checkered apron.

This is what she tells me my whole life. Guys only want sex. They are evil. They will hurt me.

I don't understand her fear. I interpret it to mean that I am not capable of handling myself around men. That I can't make smart choices. That I am an easy target.

"I don't want to live believing that, not trusting anyone," I say.

In a few years I will know that her fear is rational, even, perhaps, typical for a mother. But I have never experienced any of the hurt that she did, and a part of me will always resent her negative outlook on life. On men.

"That's not what I said," she says.

What I find to be irrational is that she seems to have personally overcome her fear, her resentment of men. She got married at eighteen. Had four daughters in the first six years of her marriage, not because she wanted a family so soon, but because doctors told her if she ever wanted a family, it needed to happen then. Her chances were slim to none, yet she produced four healthy baby girls. Girls she would dedicate years to loving and protecting. She did these things and still cannot bring herself to see any man as good. Even, sometimes, my father.

"I just want you to find a man who loves you, who you can love," she tells me several years later, when I am in college and dating Brian. "Romance doesn't last forever."

I wonder where she is going with this. I sit on her queen sized bed and trace the meandering thread pattern on the burgundy comforter.

"I wish your dad did a lot of things different," she says. I wonder what about him she wants to change. Perhaps he isn't romantic enough. Perhaps she doesn't try enough to love him the way she did when they met. Perhaps she is still healing from her hurt, from her father.

Perhaps she pretends to be normal, to be happy all these years, and just can't do it anymore.

Perhaps she is tired of trying.

Or maybe she dedicates so much of her time, energy, and mind to raising her four girls that when they no longer want to be her little girls, when they grow up, she has to remember that her current family life involves a man, a man who spends five days a week, every week, for twenty-plus years in a windowless cubicle earning a living for his wife and daughters, a man whom she once loved, married, and started a new life with. A man who, as her daughters began to drift away, she would have to return to. Perhaps this thought, conscious or not, startles her body into protest.

As my sisters and I grow, so does my mother's fear for us. When we are young, she can control, to an extent, our interactions with society. She can protect us with warnings, locked doors, and walkie-talkies. But with our age comes other activities, activities that take us away from her—school, work, boys—and she struggles to find a place she can fit into our new world. She has homeschooled us through eighth grade, each of the four of us, and when we make it to high school she is left with a void. The change is gradual. Stephanie one year, me the next, Christin two years after that, and four years later, Rebecca.

When Stephanie moves out the first time, over a boy, the change in my mother seems reasonable. My sister is making choices that my parents don't approve of—bartending at Hooters, dating alcoholics, getting piercings in places that shouldn't be pierced, and tattoos. It is radical behavior for a girl brought up in a Southern Baptist home, and I understand my mother's concern.

In 2009, when I start to date Brian, she is reserved. Here is a man who has the potential to take me away, change me, make me someone my mother doesn't know.

In 2010, Stephanie moves all the way to Chicago, and my youngest sister, Rebecca, starts high school—the last homeschooled daughter my mother had at home.

In 2011, Christin gets engaged. She is only nineteen. The engagement period is short, only three months, and my mother performs wonders to make all the necessary accommodations. Two years later, I get engaged.

We are stealing ourselves from our mother. Nature is happening. We are growing. We are leaving. She cannot protect us anymore.

When I am nine, every night ends with two kisses, one from my mom and one from my dad.

“Goodnight,” my parents say as they tuck me in, each with a hug, each with a kiss. On the lips.

“Goodnight,” I say back.

“Sleep tight,” my mom says as my dad turns out the light, “and don't let the bed bugs bite.” They walk across the hall to Christin and Rebecca's room to tuck them in too.

“Goodnight,” I hear both of my parents say to each of my sisters.

“Goodnight,” my sisters echo back.

“Sleep tight,” my mom says.

“Don't let the bug bugs bite,” my five year old sister finishes. As my mom enters the hall, Rebecca calls out to her. “Another kiss.”

“I already kissed you goodnight,” my mom says.

“One more,” Rebecca pleads. Christin joins in. “Please?” Across the hall, Stephanie is silent.

“Okay,” my mom says. I sit up in bed. I hear the soft pop of lips, skin on skin.

“Me next,” Christin says.

As my mom kisses them both again, I wait my turn to get another kiss. As she leaves their room, a wish for sweet dreams barely off her lips, I call. “Momma.” She pokes her head in my room, her body silhouetted by the light of the hallway. “Can I have another kiss too?”

“Lacey,” she says, “You’re nine years old. Do you really need another one?” I nod. She walks across my room to my bed and leans over me. As she pushes back my hair, she gives me another kiss. “Goodnight,” she says again. “Sweet dreams.”

I settle back into my bed, content. I listen as her footsteps travel down the hall, the taste of cherry lip balm still fresh around my mouth.

I don’t remember when I stopped kissing Daddy. Probably somewhere around sixth or seventh grade, when I start becoming a woman instead of a girl. Instead, at night, we hug. He still says goodnight, and I say goodnight back, but the kiss belongs now only to my mother. It is not inappropriate. We do not live around people who frown deeply on parents kissing their kids on the lips, especially a mother and daughter. We live in the South. I think nothing of these kisses. They remain, for me, a moment of cherished connection to my mom, something that exists privately between us.

In college, the kisses persist. They become, for me, less personal and more routine. They still take place before bed each night, a signifier of our going separate ways, at least while we sleep. They grow more and more brief, and I have long ago stopped asking for another.

It isn't until I am eighteen, when Brian and I start dating, that I begin to see these exchanges between me and my mother as strange.

I do not kiss Brian until we have dated for several months. A quick peck on the lips, a chaste contact, much like the kisses between me and my mother, is all I can give him. He tries so hard.

He tries in the hot tub on his parent's back porch, and I shy away. Then, when he isn't looking, I sneak a kiss quickly, a peck, terrified and brief.

"That's not fair," he says, his body movement causing waves in the water between us.

"Why not?" I ask. "You wanted a kiss, and I gave you one."

"Yes," he says, "but you won't let *me* kiss *you*." In the darkness, I can't really see his face. I know he is playful and serious at the same time, and I am frightened. I don't know how to kiss a boy, only my mother. He wants to teach me, but I am afraid.

I learn, of course. He keeps trying, and I eventually get comfortable with the effort. After our first kiss I am burning red. The skin around my mouth, neck, and chest is bright blotchy red from the hair on his face and adrenaline.

It is around this time that I grow an awareness of my mother's kisses. Brian notices them too.

"You still kiss your mom on the lips?" he asks one night at my house. My parents have just gone to bed, so he has witnessed the exchange.

"I won't give you a kiss," my mom had said to Brian after she kissed me goodnight. Brian and I both were incredibly relieved.

"Yeah," I say in response to Brian's question. "Is that weird?"

“I don’t know,” he says, which of course means that he thinks it is, but he doesn’t want to be mean.

“I don’t kiss my dad anymore,” I say, as if that justifies my family, “but with Mommy it’s always been different. It’s just something I’ve always done.”

He nods, and we leave the subject alone. But after that, I can’t kiss my mother any more. It feels like every time I say goodnight, or even goodbye, she comes at me lips first, puckered up and ready. This, of course, is only how I feel, not how she actually approaches me, but still I dread these moments. They become like a goodbye from an overly sentimental grandmother, the one who must kiss her grandkids goodbye before she leaves, big wet spitty kisses, right on the lips, as if she were saying farewell to a lover for the last time.

I begin to notice things about my mother’s kisses that I had not noticed before. If she smokes right before she goes to bed, I can smell and taste the cigarette, the nicotine, the burning of her lungs. She starts heavily applying Lip Medex before she kisses me and my sisters goodnight, and every kiss is coated in the medicated salve that is not the cherry gloss she used to wear. I smear my face clean after these kisses, cough up the smoke, and choke a little.

When I was six, my sisters and I sat up on the bathroom counter and played with the little red tube that contained her cherry kisses. We unscrewed the lip of the metal container and sniffed.

“Mmm,” Steph said, “smells like cherries.”

“I wonder if it tastes like cherries,” I said. Christin’s eyes grew wide.

“We should taste it and find out,” Christin said.

So we did. We dipped our little fingers into the salve and sat transfixed with our treasure. On the tips of our fingers was the secret of our mother's kisses. On the count of three, we put our fingers in our mouths and licked the salve from our skin.

"It tastes like cherries too," Christin said. She dipped her finger back in the container for more. Steph and I followed her lead.

My mom walked in on us at that moment. "What do you girls think you are doing?" she asked, clearly unhappy with the red balmy smears across our mouths.

We had no answer for her.

For a while after Brian and I start dating, these kisses continue. When I try to avoid them, my mother gets frustrated.

"You don't want to kiss me anymore," she says. "You're too old for that now." She says these things almost as a question, an accusation, something to which she needs me to answer, to own. I still have no answer for her. How can I tell my mother yes, I don't want to kiss her anymore, that I find it suddenly strange to kiss her goodnight and then to kiss Brian, a different kind of kiss?

Neither of us has to say it, but it is clear that the absence of these kisses signify to her that I am no longer just *her* little girl.

Five years later, I am twenty-three and planning my wedding. I am excited. Beyond excited. Tomorrow, I am going out for my first day of dress shopping with my mother, my two younger sisters, and soon-to-be mother-in-law. This day has been planned for a month. I requested off

work. Christin, the older of my two younger sisters, requested off work. Rebecca made sure her day was clear, as did my mom and Julie, my soon-to-be mother-in-law.

Brian and I are out shopping, celebrating my scholarship as a graduate teaching associate at the university I'm attending for graduate school. I will be teaching in the fall, and I need new clothes. As we walk across the parking lot to Marshalls, my phone vibrates in my khaki colored purse.

"Hello," I say. It's my mom.

"Lacey," she says, "I need to talk to you." The exhausted depression in her voice is nothing new to me. She's always like this now—it's a fact I'm getting used to.

"Okay," I say as I hook my bare arm through Brian's as we walk toward the sidewalk.

"Are you somewhere I can talk to you?" she asks. "Is now a good time?" This catches me off guard. Usually the only time she wants to talk to me alone is if I have done something to displease her, and she wants to make me aware of it. I tell her I'm out with Brian, and that we are shopping.

"Oh," she says slowly, tired, as if the very single syllable word has drained her of all energy. "Can you call me back when you are done there?" I tell her yes, and goodbye and I love her, then hang up the phone.

"What's going on?" Brian asks as we walk through the automatic doors at the Marshalls entrance.

"I don't know," I say, not overly concerned with the matter. Her tone is a constant, and doesn't mean anything is particularly wrong. "She wants me to call her back when we're done here, so I'll call her between here and Target," I say. The fact that she doesn't want to talk to me

while I was out and about has me mildly concerned, but maybe it's nothing. We let it go and shop for a while.

Later, when we're sitting in the parking lot after dropping off my one bag in Brian's car, I call her back. The phone rings. And rings. And rings. Then I hear my youngest sister's voice from several years ago, the answering machine: *Hi, you've reached the Schultz family. We're not able to come to the phone right now, so leave a message and we'll get back to you! *Beep**

"Hi, Momma," I say, "It's me. I'm just calling you back since I'm between stores right now." I wait a few minutes to give her, someone, anyone a chance to answer the phone. Nobody does. "I guess you're not around the phone right now, so just call me back when you get this." I hang up and walk over to Target with Brian.

We shop a little, find a few things.

"You should wear this," he says, holding up a dress reminiscent of a 50's style pencil skirt. It is graphite gray, with a black collar and black buttons up the front. It looks huge. I tell him as much. "But it might fit," he says. He wants to see me in it, so I agree to at least try it on. It's only ten dollars.

"I think I should wear this on the first day," I say, holding up the most brightly colored floral print dress that looks like something someone's grandma would wear. He laughs as I put it back on the rack and pick up a navy blue skirt with orange meandering designs on it. "What about this," I say, serious this time. I tilt my head slightly, examining the texture and print. "It could work, right?"

"Yeah," he agrees. "It'll make your butt look nice." He smiles playfully, browsing through the clearance rack.

“That’s the last thing I need for my first semester of teaching,” I say. I consider the skirt a moment longer before laying it over my arm with the pencil dress and a couple of other items we have found—the designated try-on pile.

We make our way to the dressing room, picking things up off the clearance racks and adding them to my pile. I only step out of the safety of the Target red dressing room walls once to show him the blue and orange skirt. Nothing else fits. But we did discover that the skirt, as Brian supposed, did make my butt look nice. I brought it with me out of the dressing room and found Brian examining a loose drape of a dress.

“You ready,” he asks as I slip my hand into his.

“Uh-huh,” I nod. My phone vibrates. Mom again. “Hello.”

“Lacey, it’s me,” she says in the same tone as earlier. “Are you at a point where I can talk to you?” I inform her that I am still out shopping with Brian, but I’m not at the checkout or in the dressing room at the moment, so now is fine. “I don’t want to upset you while you’re out,” she says.

“What’s up?” I ask, trying to convince her to just say what she has to say. I have no idea what it might be.

She does that thing that kids do when they know what they’re about to say won’t please their parents—preface it with just such an acknowledgment. “You’re probably going to be angry with me,” she says, “but I don’t think I’m going to be able to go with you tomorrow.”

Tomorrow. Dress shopping. Something every girl does with her mother when the time comes.

“Why?” I ask. I know why. She doesn’t feel well. She never feels well any more. Because I’m leaving her. We’re all leaving her—Stephanie, Christin, now me—her defense is to be sick.

“I’m really hurting,” she says. I can hear the tears in her eyes, the way the water in her face affects the sound of her voice, distorts it by changing the tone register, altering the rationality, preventing me from saying how much this upsets me. “I want to be there for you,” she says. “I know this is an exciting time in your life and I should be there, but I can’t right now. My legs—I can hardly walk.” She is forty-eight years old, soon to be diagnosed with bursitis, currently diagnosed with fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis. Some days are good—she gets up, gardens, refinishes old furniture, rearranges the house, and cooks—and other days are bad—she lays in bed all day, unable to get up, eat, or get dressed. It’s an invisible illness. It started when Steph moved away to Chicago, permanently, got worse when Christin left, and has grown since I got engaged. It is an illness I don’t understand, haven’t always tried to understand, and right now, I don’t want to understand. What matters to me right now is that my mother, a woman who has been drifting away from me for the past six years, can’t watch her own daughter try on her first wedding dress because of an ailment I can’t see.

This is not the first time she has missed something that is important to me. I suspect it will not be the last. I cry when I get off the phone with her.

“If it upsets you that much,” Brian says, “call her back and tell her she needs to come. Tell her that it *does* bother you that she can’t make it, and that you are *not* okay with her missing this time of your life.” He looks me straight in the eye. We are back in his car, my Target purchase sitting in the back seat. We are about to head home. “Tell her you want her there.”

“It’s not that easy,” I say. And it’s not. To tell her that her absence hurts me, to acknowledge that I want and need her to be there would be open disdain for her health, an issue that has been debatably out of her control for the past six years. It would be to tell her that I disapprove of her illness, of her fear of letting us go, and that I can’t understand it, or her.

My mother has never felt safe. Perhaps some of this fear is rooted in her rape, when she was a child. Perhaps some of it has ancestry in parts of her history that I know nothing about. When I was younger—five, six, ten—it felt normal. “Lock the car door, and don’t open it for anyone but me,” she would say if she left us, my sisters and me in the car while she ran into the gas station to pay for gas and cigarettes. If we didn’t lock the door, someone might drive away with us, or kidnap us, even though she never left the keys in the car. “Check in with me every couple of minutes,” she would say if we took the dog for a walk around the neighborhood, as she handed us a cobalt blue walkie-talkie, keeping its match herself. “I’m on channel five.” When my dad was out of town on business trips, she was extra cautious. “If I’m not back in five minutes,” she would say, hooking the green strap of a leash to the dog’s collar, “call 9-1-1.” She was taking the dog to the corner of our acre yard to pee. All this seemed reasonable then. To some extent, it still does—it is a characteristic that I have grown up with. But as I’ve aged, as her children have grown up, this fear has never matured. Often it is the same protective fear that dominates her advice to us.

“Be careful on your run,” she says. She cautions me daily that my three-mile track through our small neighborhood could end in a kidnapping, rape, or murder if I’m not cautious. I carry pepper-spray to appease her, and to ward off unwanted four-pawed stalkers. In some ways,

her apprehensions have become my own. I don't feel safe walking to my car by myself in the Walmart parking lot, even in broad daylight. If a stranger whistles at me, I immediately tense up and walk faster, hoping to God that he doesn't run me down and rape me, a mostly irrational thought, especially in a crowded public parking lot. It's an inherent reaction, and it never dawns on me until I am safely in my car and away that it might actually, could possibly have been, so innocent as a compliment.

We move when I am nine. Our new home in the middle of Mims, Florida—a place so remote it's not even mentioned on most maps—is a place to be explored. There is a vast wilderness behind my new house: a drain-off ditch spanning about an acre in length, a barbed wire fence, and simple brown cows on the other side of the ditch, in unmarked territory. My nine-year-old mind is endlessly entertained in the jungle of unmowed weeds. I have a favorite tree, the pepper tree that overlooks our miniature above-ground pool, my summer haven. I love the way the tree smells in the summer, sweet blossoms fragrant with camphor, lush and green. It's easy to pass uncounted half-hours in the V of the tree, scrutinizing the jigsaw pieces of bark clothing the trunk and branches, observing microscopic insects cleverly camouflaged to match the tree.

My sisters and I frequent the valley behind the back fence, where we conjure up fantasies of rescue missions for lost crusaders, carefully plot the whereabouts of Ant Island—a mere pine smothered hill elevated like a massive ant hill, and usually as inhabited by the indigenous fire ants so famous to Florida—and recklessly pioneer our way across fallen tree bridges, spanning the gap between home and adventure. The other side of the fence solicits, from time to time, terrifying yells of trespass and gunshots that only children might imagine favorably.

Sometimes we sneak our way to the back of the neighborhood, a good mile from our yellow house, three houses from the main road. We delight in finding an abandoned railroad track on which we spend hours pretending to be hunted by runaway trains, playing dinosaurs—characters from *Land Before Time*—and rescuing wayward gopher tortoises, which we bring all the way home where we inscribe, in permanent marker, their new names on the back of their shells: Radar, Iggy, and X, respectively. Then we release them. No one has yet told us that this is illegal.

We are secured by the infallible safety of a two-way walkie-talkie set, a Christmas gift from my grandparents a year ago. Mommy keeps one, and we, Stephanie and I, the other. It is more fun scanning the channels than staying on the one Mommy has chosen as our lifeline, occasionally intercepting conversations which we interpret to be sinister plots and mysteries. We then assume, and naturally so, the role of Nancy Drew, amateur detective. We are young and brave, fighting crime, solving mysteries, sleuths of nature.

On the tracks we walk, and walk, and walk. To our left: undeveloped wilderness. To the right: heavy woods between the track and the neighborhood. Effect: total seclusion. And poor walkie-talkie connection.

The sun blazes around the palmetto, insects alive with chatter. It strikes me as unnatural, the way the heat bounces off the flat surfaces of the brush. In the distance waves of heat reflect off the rusted metal tracks, a mirage.

Along the trail of abandoned tracks is an old semi-truck that we have named Mack. Mack is our nemesis, a mystery. For whatever reason, Mack, a presumably abandoned semi cab, key on the floorboard, always in the same place, makes me uneasy. I fear that it is not as abandoned as it

looks, that someone will step out of the empty cab, startled by our presence. The intruding presence of this modern specimen in my fantastic world of make believe announces a potential threat, the potential presence of another human being.

“I don’t think we should be back here,” I say. I recall Mommy’s frequent words, *you could be kidnapped, or raped, or murdered*. I have little idea what these things mean, but I understand that my mother fears them, and so I fear too, for the sake of fearing.

“Why?” Stephanie asks. “Are you afraid?”

“No,” I say. I refuse to give her the pleasure of teasing me. I am terrified. Of what, I have no clear idea, but I am afraid because of the intonation in my mother’s constant warning voice that bad things can happen to little girls who wander alone. “It’s just that Mommy said we shouldn’t be back here by ourselves,” I say. “What if someone really *is* back here?” I glance around nervously, and wonder if some cloaked figure from a Nancy Drew book will step out from behind the cab armed with chloroform. I love the tracks, but I don’t like coming out as far as Mack.

“Don’t be silly. No one’s every here with old Mack.” She tosses her long pony-tail in the air in a matter-of-fact way. She is braver than I.

“But—” I wiggle my gritty grubby toes in my sweaty socks.

“But what?” she says. “We’re just having a little fun. There’s nothing wrong with that.” She crosses her arms, feet slightly spread, her fearless stance. She’s not leaving.

I know old Mack is just an abandoned semi-truck, and there probably isn’t any real harm in walking around it. But we are in the middle of a side trail by abandoned railroad tracks in a rural neighborhood, as far away from the houses as we can be. Our walkie-talkie has no signal. If

we need help, no one will hear us. Mommy's warnings echo in my ears, terrifying words which my mind cannot comprehend. I don't yet know what sex is. I can't wrap my mind around the idea that someone could hold a gun to my head, or plunge a knife through my heart and kill me. These things only happen in movies. I have heard stories of children who disappear, never to be found. I am frightened by the idea of never seeing my family again, but I can't understand why it might happen.

Years later, when I am twenty-one, I will run on the trail that was once the railroad track. It will look different, the track having been torn up years ago and turned into a horse trail. To my right will be the same woods between the trail and houses that used to be there. To my left will be a golf course. The effect will be near seclusion, more or less conducive to a jogging atmosphere. My mom will still admonish me to carry mace or pepper spray. It will still be an adventure. I will encounter the occasional wayward tortoise, and I will leave him alone.

One night I will encounter a couple driving a golf cart down the trail. As I pass them, the woman in the passenger seat will warn me to be careful.

"We saw a man on the side of the trail just a few minutes ago, back that way," she will say, pointing in the direction I am heading. "Didn't look like he was up to much good." I will proceed with my run as if nothing has happened. I will search the ditch on either side of the trail desperately, vainly, hoping not to see any man, intent on seeing him, if he is there, before he sees me. Bushes will crunch with the activity of nature. I will keep scouting nervously to my left and right, insects will buzz and hum in the ragged weeds along the trail, and in a frenzy of adrenaline and nerves, I will decide to leave the trail and go home. When I get to the main road, I will think of the girl who used to wander this same trail, a trail she mostly thought void of danger. All my

mother's fears will come back to me, her warnings: the hypothetical image of my mangled body discarded in some side road ditch, only I never see my face. My imagination will not allow it. But I will remember, and I will wonder about the little girl who used to play so carelessly, the girl that has grown up, the girl that will, in a few short years, make a promise to a man that will remove her from her mother's protection forever. She has long since been missing, an abduction of reality, of fear and worry—kidnapped by adulthood.

PLAYING PARTS

Please, say you are my sister, that it may be well with me.

Genesis 12: 13

There's a home video my mom took of me and my sister in our tiny old house in Florida, on Cynthia Drive. In this video Stephanie and I are running around a considerably small living room space dancing and doing cartwheels on the ochre colored shag carpet. The donation tweed style couches are visible in the background, a shade of brown that was not intended to match anything. This means my mom was standing in front of the sliding glass doors that opened up to our excuse of a backyard with an in-ground pool, probably to prevent our tirades from ending in a broken door or broken bones and lacerations.

I have no memory of this moment outside of the captured images.

My mom zoomed the camera in on my face. I gave her a cheesy smile, as only a five-year-old with missing teeth can, long stringy blond hair stuck to the sweat on my neck. My aqua blue Little Mermaid t-shirt hung loosely around my body, and when I did a cartwheel, my panties showed.

"Momma, look at me," Stephanie, my oldest sister yelled.

My mom turned the camera to her. Steph smiled a toothy smile, much like mine. Then she stuck out her tongue and rocked her head back and forth, swinging her long blond hair like a rock star. She was six.

"That's not very nice, Stephanie," my mom said from behind the camera. "Put your tongue back in your mouth." Then the camera panned back to me.

I was born and raised in a Southern Baptist church. Until I was eighteen I had never been kissed, never dated, and was deathly afraid of anything related to sex.

Steph and I looked alike—we were about the same height, and we had the same nose. The similarities stopped there. Her eyes were blue, mine were brown. But we were close.

Stephanie was the rebellious child, the eldest of four daughters, all homeschooled until high school. Something clicked on, and there was no turning it off. She was free. When she entered that world she went head first, arms open, embracing life in every sense. She tried alcohol. She tried sex. She tried dating. She tried sex some more.

When I got to high school, I shut down. The more freedom I had the more constraints I placed on myself. I don't know why. I might never know. Perhaps it was a mere difference of genetic wiring. Perhaps I cared more about what people, my parents and church family, would think of me.

Once, before high school, Steph and I drafted a script for a mystery movie that we wanted to make with a few of our friends. I was twelve and she was fourteen. We read *Nancy Drew* a lot, so coming up with a mystery wasn't a problem. We were captivated by the friendship that existed between Nancy and her comrades, Bess and George, and their sometimes colleagues, Frank and Joe, from the *Hardy Boys* collection. Our script had three lead females: Stephanie, Me, and a friend. Ideally, we needed three male characters. These characters would be the female characters' boyfriends. To play these roles, we chose our current crushes.

In this proposed film, we, as ourselves, would get to interact with the boys that we liked, have chase scenes, escape scenes, or even holding hands scenes.

This film was never made. The script was never complete. We never got our scenes.

A year later, during her freshmen year of high school, Steph made a friend.

“Nicole wants to make a movie,” Steph told me one night. We shared a room, and often stayed up well past our mandated bed time talking about boys.

“What kind of movie?” I asked. “Like our mystery one? Can I be in it?” A train whistled in the distance.

“Not exactly,” she said. “I don’t know what all it’s about, but I know she was going to ask this guy I met in gym class to be in it. He’s so hot.”

Under the covers I took my size A bra off and tossed it on to the floor next to her C bra.

“We’re going to do this scene where we go to a movie and start making out,” she said. I curled my toes around the bed sheets and tucked my legs into my stomach. “We get behind the seat where the camera can’t see us, so all you can hear is the movie, until we come up gasping for air. It’s going to be so much fun.”

This movie didn’t sound fun to me. There was no plot. No mystery. I couldn’t be involved. I decided I didn’t like this guy Steph had met. Or Nicole. Or their movie.

I don’t know if that movie was ever made either. I suspect it was not.

The guy, Quinton, was Steph’s first boyfriend. She got her kissing scene, whether it was filmed or not. She also got a few more scenes with Quinton, scenes that she shared with me beneath the rumble of distant trains passing by.

At thirteen all I knew of sex was how it happened and that it was, by Biblical standards, supposed to be saved for marriage. I felt that Quinton had somehow robbed my sister of herself. I never once blamed her for her own actions. I told my mother what Steph had told me.

I was no longer Steph's confidant.

I sat on the floor of my childhood house packing for an end-of-my-first-college-semester family hunting trip to Georgia and going over my list of things not to forget.

My phone rang in the middle of the floor. I stepped carefully around piles of jeans, shirts, jackets, dresses, shoes, hats, bras, and panties to see who it was. My boyfriend, Brian. I picked up my hairbrush and combed quickly through my hair as I flipped the phone open and accepted the call.

"What are you up to?" he asked. I told him I was packing. I surveyed the excess of clothes around me—it was ridiculous to pack so many outfits for three days, but my younger sister wanted to do a photo shoot while we were at my uncle's farm, so the surplus of garage sale 80's dresses, thrift-store heels, and push-up bras was necessary.

"What are *you* up to?" I asked

"I'm at Ryan's house," he said. "Just hanging out with the guys, you know?"

"Cool," I said. Laughter erupted in the background. "What are they laughing at?" I couldn't decide if I wanted the gold sequin dress or the Dolly Parton blue.

"Nothing, they're just looking at pictures," he said. "No man, I don't want to see that. I'm on the phone with her sister," he said to someone on his end. My skin felt prickly. Then warm and flush. A quick bump-thump of the heart as it skips half a beat. I had no idea what he and his friends were talking about, but it didn't feel right.

"Well it must be pretty funny," I said, trying to get him to share.

“You don’t want to know, really.” I could tell he didn’t want to share the joke. It didn’t occur to me that it might be awkward for him to tell his girlfriend.

“I do now,” I said. “I’m pretty sure I heard something about Steph.” He wasn’t laughing to begin with, but his tone changed—got quieter, more hesitant— as if I just asked him to explain a bad sex joke to a die-hard-born[again]-and-raised Southern Baptist Christian. This was exactly what I had done.

“I don’t think I should—”

“It’s okay, really,” I laughed nervously. Now I was curious.

He sighed in surrender.

“They’re looking at pictures of your sister.”

“Not sure how that’s funny, but okay—”

“On a porn site.”

“Oh.” For a minute I didn’t say anything. The pair of gold high-heels I was holding fell to my feet. My mind flashed back to two years earlier.

“Steph, can I borrow this for school tomorrow?” I’d asked, rounding the corner to the front room holding up a white plastic hanger with a red-orange fitted polo on it. I was nearing the end of my sophomore year of high school. Steph was a junior.

She minimized the Myspace message window and turned to look at me. My eyes shifted from the hidden window to her two-shades-too-dark heavily powdered face.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said, and walked to my room, down the long orange hall filled with pictures of me and my sisters—grubby little bobbed hair girls in one-piece swimsuits lined up in front of

the waves at the beach—wondering if I really saw what I thought I saw. I closed my bedroom door and placed the shirt, still on its hanger, on my bed.

Those words.

I can't find any guys willing to do porn.

I don't know why I didn't say anything then. Why I didn't march my sixteen-year-old self back down the hall and demand to know who she was talking to, and what about. Why I didn't tell my parents what I saw. But I didn't. I wrote it off, told myself that I saw something out of context. It must have been a joke. An inside joke. I clearly wasn't on the inside. I held to my silence.

“You still there?” Brian asked. He was asking me about this thing I had tried for two years to make unreal by forgetting. The exasperation in his voice registered as I realized why he didn't want to say anything. We hadn't been dating long, so he didn't know Steph very well. His friends had gone to high school with her. This wasn't the kind of knowledge that a relationship was supposed to start with.

“Yeah,” I whispered.

“You okay?”

I wanted to tell him no. I had just found out, for sure, that my sister had done porn. There would be no forgetting or ignoring it this time. No wishing it away. Now it was a concrete fact. It was true.

“Yeah,” I repeated. I couldn't do this right now. I had to ride in a car with my Dad and younger sister the next day for six to eight hours. “I'm uh... I'm going to finish packing.”

“Ok.” The other guys were still laughing in the background.

“I’ll talk to you later.”

I hung up. My family was asleep. The house was dead quiet.

I crammed both the blue and sequin dresses into my suitcase. A Frank Peretti book sat on my bed, next to my journal. I grabbed both, placed the journal in my suitcase—I’d want it tomorrow—and left the book out for the ride.

I would read for the entire drive to Georgia. I wouldn’t remember what I read. I would think only of that conversation. I would feel a little better when Brian texted me during the ride upstate to tell me that he didn’t look at the pictures, that it would have been awkward, that he wouldn’t do that to me. And I would believe him.

I would stay quiet in the car, pretend that nothing was wrong. Pretend that my silence could protect my family from this humiliation. From the small-town gossip that was inevitable. I would do the photo shoot with my little sister in the Dolly Parton dress, and I would smile. I would stand with my back to the camera, drop my shoulders and turn my upper body toward her, looking back over my shoulder, and force a red-lipped smile.

My parents found out a few short months after I did. A huffy-housewife-neighbor decided it was her place to let my mom know that her daughter was the talk of the town. Mims, Florida is a small place—it didn’t take much for popularity, good or bad.

My dad never said anything about it to me. My mom asked me about it in the garage over a cigarette. Neither of them knew how much I knew. I hadn’t even said anything about it to Steph, not knowing what to say. It stayed between Brian and me.

“It just hurts me that she would do something like this,” my mom said. She was sitting in the garage—she never smoked in the house—venting to me about her frustrations. “What did I do wrong? Where did I mess up?”

Steph and I were raised in the same house, under the same scriptures, by the same parents. What she was asking, not for the first time in my life, was why Steph couldn’t have been more like me. Why she couldn’t have played the part of the good child, the one who came home from school and sat down straight away to do her homework. The one who earned straight A’s in school. The one going to college. The one working hard for her money instead of flirting with drunks for tips at Hooters.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I said. I believed it. My parents treated my siblings and me equally. They had tried to rein Steph in during high school, when she’d stayed out hours past her curfew without so much as a phone call, come home drunk, and tell my parents that she was at the bowling alley, or a movie. Their efforts failed every time. She just wouldn’t have it.

Call it strong will, rebellion, a free spirit—whatever—she would not meet their terms of living, and moved out as soon as she was eighteen. Perhaps this is why I tried so hard to be perfect. If she wouldn’t be, I could make up for her by doing exactly what I was supposed to, all the time, in home and church, with God and my parents, with school and work. If I could be the opposite of her, I could keep the peace.

“I must have done *something* wrong,” my mom said. “This must be punishment for the way I used to treat my mother.” She grew up with five other siblings, in borderline poverty. Six kids—three boys and three girls—they put her mom through hell.

“No,” I said. I never had any explanations for Steph’s behavior. It couldn’t be anyone’s fault. Steph was just Steph—wild.

“How long did you know?” she asked. When she told me that the neighbor had told her, my lack of surprise gave me away, and I confessed that I already knew.

“A couple of months,” I answered. “Since Georgia.”

“And you didn’t say anything?”

I shrugged. I had given up saying anything years ago, after Quinton. Steph didn’t tell me anything personal through the rest of high school. We barely had a relationship. She didn’t understand how I thought I was protecting her, and I didn’t understand how she couldn’t see that she was doing everything wrong. When she graduated, that started to change, to mend. I didn’t want to ruin it again. Instead I let my mother fall apart behind closed doors, while I did the same, wishing all this away.

“What good would it have done?” I asked. “You would have still been upset, and she would have been mad at me.”

“It’s all over town,” she said. “Mr. Heart came by after Loraine to tell me that the site had just been flagged on the department radar. They’re checking for minors.” Mr. Heart was a deputy who lived in our neighborhood. Apparently the site had originally been privately owned, a members only kind of deal, which was why no one knew about it for so long. When it changed ownership, the new owner made it a public site. It was flagged at the police department, and they needed to talk to Steph to make sure everyone involved had been over eighteen. “Have you seen what’s on there?” she asked.

I had not. I never went to the site to see what was on it. I couldn't. Didn't want to. Didn't need to. Thought if I didn't see it, it might go away.

My mom did. Needed verification I guess. She told me what she saw, how appalling it was. Videos and pictures. Couldn't tell which one was Steph. Full character profiles for each of the girls—Steph used a fake name.

“Anyone can see it,” she said. “I hope no one sees it and says anything to you or your sisters. They don't need to know about it.”

But I'd walked from the campus parking lot and headed straight for my classroom, clutching my books close to my chest. Thanksgiving break was over, and I had a test in Oceanography.

As I entered the classroom I heard my name on the lips of a former high school cheerleader, a girl I graduated with. We weren't really friends.

“Hey girl,” she said in a super sweet fake voice as coated in cherry lip-gloss as her red lips. She waved me back outside the room into the open hall. She scanned the area to make sure no one was listening, then whispered, “Do you know your sister is on a porn site?”

“Yeah, I know.” Mind your own business.

“I just wanted to make sure you knew, 'cause like, I would totally be pissed as hell if I found out something like that about my brother.” I didn't want to imagine anyone else could understand what I was feeling—the betrayal, the confusion, the hurt and anxiety.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said. I wanted to hit her. Pull her hair. Do something really stupid and pointless to ruin the satisfaction on her freckled face. It wasn't her fault. I didn't stop to think about how she might have known. But in that moment I didn't want anyone to talk about my

sister—I could still try to keep the peace, but only if people stopped reminding me that the peace was already broken.

She turned and strutted her tight pants into the classroom.

I followed her in and took my seat for the exam without another word.

About a year after the porn incident, I worked at a restaurant, Village Inn, home of pie, pancakes, and everything greasy and gross that the stomach may desire. It was approaching lunch rush, and I was the only server on the floor.

Booth number thirty—not a corner booth—along the inner wall—green floors—food stains—drink stains—vomit stains that I couldn’t get out from the week before—a middle-aged couple—a white-haired man and his wife.

Occasion for conversation ensued during the course of their meal. They were discussing the wife’s country of origin, and asked if I had ever left the country.

“Yes,” I said. “Peru.” I’d gone the previous summer with a group from my church.

“Oh,” the white-haired gentleman said. “Do you know Kevin? He went to Peru a year ago with a group of kids from his church. I think he said it was a mission trip.”

“Yeah, I was there,” I said. Kevin was my pastor’s son. I had grown up with him. He always said he was my adopted older brother. “Would you like a refill on your soda?”

As he nodded his wife asked, “Are you the girl who did the pictures?”

“No, she’s not,” the white-haired gentleman said before I could respond. “She’s not the one who did the nude photos.”

“I’ll be right back with your soda,” I said in answer.

I disappeared behind the salad bar, the soda line and the dish pit. My stomach turned as I walked past the rotting food in the garbage can next to the dish line—even the clean dishes smelled of mildew, the floor sour—grease and mold.

Stephanie. Kevin.

I got goose bumps all up my arms and down my spine. I leaned against the white popcorn style walls along the soda line and breathed deeply, feeling the blood under my skin. I composed myself, refilled the soda, and walked back to table thirty, check in hand.

I didn't say anything about it for two years. Again I wanted to keep the peace. I had never said anything to Steph about the porn site. After word had gotten out, my parents confronted her. I was asked to keep my two younger sisters occupied in my room while they talked to Steph. I expected yelling and fighting and rage—there was only silence. Whatever was said, she apologized, and they resolved the issue quietly. Steph took it for granted that I knew about it, wouldn't say anything to her, and we could keep being normal sisters. I just wanted to be her friend.

This time I directed my anger at the pastor's son, at the pastor for having such a child. I didn't want to believe the white-haired man. I didn't have the pictures as evidence, and even if I did, I would have burned them. I couldn't imagine what this might do to my parents. They would fall apart. Again. I was falling apart. Again.

I couldn't rationalize my way through this knowledge, this second offense. The photos with Kevin. We were at the beach. She rubbed coconut tanning oil on her legs. She offered me the bottle.

“I have to ask you something,” I said. She tilted her head and looked at me funny. Her chin length brunette hair blew in the wind.

“That doesn’t sound good.” She laughed.

“I had this couple at work a while back,” I said, and told her the story.

“Wow,” she said. “Kevin wasn’t supposed to show those to anyone.” That was her response. No denial. “I hate this small town. Everyone knows everything about me.”

“So, it’s true?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask how long ago?”

“Not too long—I don’t know. It was after the thing with the site. After he found out about it he asked if I’d be interested. I didn’t mind. The porn thing was back in high school. This was only nudes.”

“Is there a difference?” I asked. I know now that there is, technically, but then I didn’t, nor did I think that her answer justified the crime, as I saw it, and I failed to understand how she thought this was any better.

“Yeah,” she said. The sun was bright, so she put on her Gucci sunglasses, bought and paid for by a customer at the sports bar where she worked. “Porn is, well, porn,” she looked at me to make sure I was following her—I nodded—“nudes are more tasteful. You can’t actually see anything. It’s like, just a silhouette.”

She would show me one later, without asking if I wanted to see it. Would just pull it out of her car and show me the black and white canvas print—a backlit silhouette of a female, clearly nude, that I wouldn’t recognize as my sister.

I nodded again, and quietly rubbed in the borrowed tanning lotion.

“Are you mad at me?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know.” I was a little. With time I had forgiven the site. It was something she did in high school, and never since. She had expressed regret. But I couldn’t understand this, especially because it involved the pastor’s son, a role model, and man who proclaimed himself my adopted older brother. I couldn’t understand. I thought she was past that.

“Kevin wasn’t supposed to show those pictures to anyone,” she said, as if this made a difference. “I’m going to have to talk to him about that.”

I suppose it was chance that brought the couple to my table where they recognized me. Maybe it was providence. Or fate. If two people I had never met could see the similarities, mistake me for Steph, this wouldn’t stay secret long.

“Kevin asked me to show him the site,” she said. “I think that’s kind of creepy. I mean, I grew up around him.”

I shrugged, unable to speak my agreement. It struck me as odd that only now would she consider the strangeness of men, even men she knew, watching the site. In a small town where everyone graduated college and went to community college, an extension of high school, there were still a lot of people around that went to school with her. Everybody knew.

It was strange to think of her as a small town porn star. Just as strange to eventually see her nude on a canvas print.

There’s a picture on my wall from Steph’s twenty-first birthday. It sits on an oak shelf in a black frame trimmed in silver. In this photo Steph wears a black scoop-neck dress that stops mid-thigh,

paired with knee-high boots and a silver chain necklace. I have on a fitted black and white striped dress about the same length. Her hair is shoulder-length and dyed deep brunette. Mine is at my chin, a hint of red under the top layer, accented by a small red rose tucked behind my ear.

We're on the front porch, under the arbor my mom built and covered with passion vine, taking pictures before we leave for dinner.

"Smile for the camera," my mom said.

Steph leaned in close to me, put a hand on my shoulder, and whispered, "Make a silly face."

Flash.

I grimaced, face pulled down in a frown. Steph stuck her tongue out.

HOW WE KEEP

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6

Texas was a battle ground.

We lined up our toys along the stretch of hall between our upstairs bedrooms. The white hall was dark with no windows. We were careful to avoid the stairs, lest our champions suffer a fatal fall.

The battles were brutal. Stuffed dogs, bears, rabbits, and baby dolls flew through the air at each other's necks, arms, and legs. They weren't usually armed. Christin had a black rat that she bought at a home décor store. It smelled like burnt rubber. She loved it. Steph and I hated it. Rebecca was too young to be part of our play, and had no champion in battle, but when she insisted, or our mother made us include her, she was on Christin's side. My dog, Muffy, and Steph's dog, Wolf, against the evil rat, and whatever comrade Rebecca occasioned to contribute. Sisters pitted against each other.

When the battle was over, or a truce had been called, we gathered our injured troops and ushered them into our bedroom where we laid out stretchers of baby blankets and pillows on our forest green bunk beds and made bandages out of toilet paper. We put red lipstick on the paper to emphasize the wound. The bloodier the better. Then, after they had all been cared for, we tucked each toy into a blanket, bandages and all, and kissed them goodnight. They had fought long and hard. It was time to rest. We never knew when the next battle would be.

When they weren't in battle, Muffy and Wolf had secret weddings. Muffy was my stuffed German Shepherd. I slept with him every night. He had a silky black back and dark tan legs with a light fluffy chest. Brown marble eyes, and soft rubber eyebrows that gave him character. He had no collar. I brushed him with Barbie brushes and discarded toothbrushes—the bristles made his fur soft—until he began to bald on his back and front legs. His eyes grew white spots that looked like cataracts, but they were from play, not from the sun. One of his eyes fell off once, when I tossed him across the kitchen. He hit the floor with a smack and a little brown eye skidded across the wood patterned tile. I cried until my mom super-glued it back on.

We held wedding ceremonies for them about once a week. Instead of a piano, they had a choir of teddy bears to sing Wolf down the aisle. A toilet paper veil. No groomsmen. Sometimes one of my other stuffed dogs, Balto, was the minister, other times he was the villain, stealing Wolf in the middle of the ceremony so that Muffy would have to rescue her.

The ceremonies were secret, held in the dead of night when we were supposed to be asleep, or while our mom worked on school with Christin, down the hall. We were left to do our own work, our mother having already explained it to us. We had more important things to do. One of the perks of being homeschooled—there was always time for adventures.

These adventures between Muffy and Wolf were some of the first physical enactments that Steph and I shared regarding romance. In all the years we had these toys, they never abandoned each other, and we never abandoned them, even when we moved to Florida in 1999. To say that they represented our relationship might be accurate. To say that they shaped our understanding of what a relationship should look like, conditioned us, evidence of the

theories of Ivan Pavlov, might also be accurate. Muffy and Wolf never grew apart. We kept them, perhaps, because the real dogs we owned growing up were always changing.

Before my family moved from Florida to Texas in 1998, we owned three different dogs.

When I was five I begged my mom to go to the SPCA when we were in town for groceries, or gym class, or other errands. Anything to visit the puppies.

“Why?” she asked. “You know your dad won’t allow one in the house, and you’ll only be upset when we have to leave them behind.”

“I know,” I said. With four daughters, my parents didn’t need another animal. “But they need to be loved. They probably get lonely.” At five years old I didn’t know that the volunteers who ran the SPCA actually took care of the dogs there—I thought they were neglected and cruelly abandoned. Secretly, I hoped she would fall in love with one, would say whatever magic words needed to be said to my dad to convince him that a puppy was a good idea. When she saw Rosy, my plan worked.

Rosy was very much a puppy when we brought her home. She was red-brown with short fine hair and chocolate eyes. I never learned what my mom said to my dad to convince him to let us have a puppy. But she said something, and Rosy was ours. We didn’t have her for more than a week. She was a hound mix, something not noted on her files at the SPCA, and the baying was something my mother wouldn’t handle. Too much noise. An unacceptable sound.

“But all dogs bark,” I said to my mom after I learned that we could not keep Rosy—my dream.

“Not like this,” she said. We would look for a quieter pet. One that didn’t kiss the air with haunting chants. I didn’t understand why this part of Rosy’s personality was flawed. I didn’t understand why the decision to adopt her was my dad’s, but the whim that banished her was my mom’s. Perhaps it was because he was at work all day, paying for her, but not hearing.

In this fashion we continued to own pets, particularly dogs. We had one for a while, then got rid of it. Then got another. It always felt wrong, but as a child I had little say in my parents’ decisions about pets. Each time I was elated with the companion, only to be within a year—never more—broken by the whisper of goodbye. I made a promise to myself to never be the same way. I promised myself that when I grew up, I would keep the first dog I owned until it died.

My family couldn’t hold on to anything. This lack of tie, of loyalty, of the need and ability to hold on to something—what does it say about us? Can we not keep ourselves, even as we can’t keep each other?

At the end of my sophomore year of high school, a close friend, Steven, asked me out. We were sitting on the hood of his car on a night when there was supposed to be a meteor shower.

“Will you be my girlfriend?” he asked. I was sixteen. He was my best friend. I had never dated before.

I said yes.

He placed his warm wet hand in mine, full of the sweat of Florida humidity. I saw a single falling star. For the rest of that night, and the next three days, he let go of my hand only when I went home—from school, his house, wherever we had been. Within three days, I realized I couldn’t date him. He was getting over a bad breakup. I was a placeholder to him, filling a

void. He loved me, but as a replica of the girl he lost, and in his hand I felt like a possession, his obsession. He wanted me to replace this other girl, and I couldn't ascend to that level of devotion. I thought that once I was committed, I could keep something, someone. But I was afraid of commitment, of time spent with someone who was not *the one*. Afraid, perhaps, of somehow losing him.

He drove me home one night, three days after I agreed to date him, after hanging out at his house with some friends. All night he tried to hold my hand—a finger touching mine, warm, always nervous, repulsive to me in my uncertainty—a self-defense, to be repelled by someone so close—I checked my phone repeatedly, flipped it open and watched the battery slowly die, killing my excuse not to touch him. When it was dead, his hand reached again for mine, and there it was in his car, on our way to my house.

“We are better as friends.” I said when he asked me what was wrong, why I had been silent all night.

“I don't understand.” He shifted awkwardly in his seat and pulled his hand from mine, resting it finally on the steering wheel. I tucked my own hands under my legs, hiding.

“I can't be your girlfriend. I can't date you.” I stared at the floorboard, at the miniscule crumbs on the rubber mat, the collection of coins and old receipts.

There wasn't another car on the road. Strange quiet enveloped us—a vacuum—two people unable to hold on, unable to hear the night chirping around them.

“Why?” he asked. “Did I do something wrong?” He didn't look at me, kept his eyes on the road.

“We’re just better as friends. You didn’t do anything wrong. Believe me, I still want us to be friends, I do. But that’s all I want for us.” I paused for a minute. He still didn’t look at me. “I’m sorry.”

After Rosy, there was Gizmo.

My aunt and uncle came to Florida from Indiana for a visit and brought their Shih Tzu puppy with them. I fell in love with this little rat dog and my aunt and uncle couldn’t bear to take him away from their six-year-old niece. My parents were less than excited. I was ecstatic. He was going to be mine. My parents agreed that since I wanted him, he was my responsibility. This was the opportunity I had begged for—to show them I could be responsible, that I could keep a pet.

His brown and white fur bounced with every step he took. He was small enough for me to carry. He was energetic. He was the stupidest dog I ever met, impossible to train—probably the reason my aunt and uncle were so willing to depart from him. He peed and pooped everywhere, no matter how many times my mom punished him for not going outside. The crumbs we dropped during meals were left on the floor, his interest captured elsewhere. His silky long hair picked up stickers and sand spurs from our dry weed-eaten yard, but he wouldn’t pick up specs of food from breakfast, lunch, or dinner—one of the few theoretically positive aspects of owning a dog that my dad could find—so the morsels stuck to his fur instead, next to the stickers and spurs. The Florida sun grew hotter each time I had to take him out, and I got bored. Frustrated. Impatient. The responsibility was more than I imagined, so I stopped liking him.

When I took him outside I snapped on his leash—if I didn't he would sneak under a hole in the fence, or just run around instead of do his business, or poop in the sandbox instead of his designated corner of the yard—and intentionally walked faster than I knew he could. He never wanted to go to his corner of the yard. I thought if I moved fast enough he wouldn't notice where we were going. My plan never worked. He stopped half-way to his corner, and I dragged him to his spot, where he just stared at me with watery eyes.

“Stupid dog,” I said to him. He cocked his head and looked at me, his face half hidden by hair.

My mom got tired of cleaning up after him, and of hearing me complain about taking him out. We gave him to one of my dad's co-workers. This woman had several yorkies, one named Garfield, that would be Gizmo's new playmates. I was sad to get rid of Gizmo. I didn't understand why. I hated taking care of him, but when the reality of telling him goodbye hit me, it hurt. I was sorry I hadn't been a better owner. When I saw him playing with Garfield in that woman's kitchen, I knew my parents had made the right decision, but I still didn't want to let go.

“Gizmo,” I called to him. He didn't come. He never did. I walked across the woman's kitchen, carefully avoiding the puddles and piles that lined her floor—little minefields—and picked him up. “I'm leaving you,” I whispered in his soft fuzz lined ear. “I have to say goodbye now.” His tail wagged, he looked at me, then down at the floor, inches away, to his new playmates. He wiggled in my arms, unaware that I'd never see him again. “I love you.”

That's when we got Sandy. I don't know exactly how old I was when we got her. I don't know what prompted my parents to get another dog, to trade one in for the other, but they did, and

Sandy was it. When we picked her out, I didn't want her. All of her siblings looked like German Shepherds, like the stuffed animal I would acquire after we moved to Texas. They were big for their age and full of energy. Fat healthy puppies I knew I could play with, knew I wouldn't have to worry about hurting. I almost had my parents convinced that the one I was holding was *the one* when Sandy crawled out from under a parked car. The runt of the litter, she was tinier than a Chihuahua, blond, and had a grease stain on her back from the car. My mom instantly loved her. I still wanted the fatter darker puppy I was holding. It had more personality, I said. I changed my mind when we got Sandy home and bathed her. She had a bark that matched her size and she was extremely affectionate. We played tug-of-war with her new toys in the kitchen, where she shredded a rope until her gums bled.

“What's wrong with her?” I asked my parents, worried that she was injured, that she might leave us in the night. Might die.

“Puppies lose their teeth,” my mom said, “just like children. She may have pulled one loose playing with her toy.”

Then it was time for bed. When my parents put her in her crate with a blue blanket to keep her warm, she cried little puppy whimpers that I couldn't escape. I thought she was in pain, worried that she thought we abandoned her, and I begged my parents to let her sleep in my bed with me. They promised that she would be fine until morning. She was.

I have a picture of Sandy with my one-year-old sister, Rebecca. It was taken outside, with the sun directly behind, so that everything in the front is a silhouette. We were playing in the sprinklers. My mom must have been on her knees in the grass when she took the picture, because

the lens was level with Sandy, who never got very big for a Shepherd mix. Rebecca smiled at my mom while Sandy licked the sweat from her neck.

When we moved to Texas for my dad's work, where Steph and I adopted Muffy and Wolf, Sandy got a new home.

"We're staying with your grandparents until we find a house," my mom told me. "They don't want a dog." It didn't occur to me that whatever we brought would become my grandparent's too, that a pet for us meant a pet for them. Sandy stayed in Florida, with her new owners. We visited her once before we moved—my mother's idea—to make sure she was happy in her new home. She was outside playing in the sprinklers with her new family and their son, but when we walked through the back gate, she ran towards us and covered us in slobber kisses. She still remembered us.

Stephanie was never afraid of dating. At fifteen, her first boyfriend was Quintin.

At thirteen, I had not yet read *The Sound and the Fury*, a book that I would come to love four years later. A book in which Quentin, spelled differently, is obsessed with a love for his sister, for the desire to protect her virginal honor, even if it means taking her honor himself. Quintin did not have my sister's honor in mind when they started dating. He came over one day after school to hang out with Steph. I was a year away from high school and loved, in my spare time, to watch *Lord of the Rings* over and over and over again. I convinced Steph and Quintin to watch it with me in my room. That they agreed excited me. Steph never wanted to hang out with me once she got to high school—she was too cool for my childish antics. When she and Quintin agreed to watch a movie, my favorite movie, with me, I felt privileged, like Steph and I were still

close. We popped some popcorn, extra butter, and got comfortable. I sat up on my bed with Muffy by my side—Steph and I always used to keep Muffy and Wolf nearby when we watched movies. They sat on the floor, right up against the edge of my bed using my brand new blue and white checkered body pillow as a backrest—Wolf was nowhere around. I didn't notice that they rarely looked at the screen for the duration of our three hour journey through Middle Earth. I could see only the tops of their heads, brown hair. It didn't register to me that these heads were very close together, or that they made contact a few times.

A few nights later, at an all-girl sleepover in my room, Steph revealed a new secret. She and Quintin had done things, during the movie, on my floor, on my new pillow. My new pillow. And I hadn't even noticed. I was horrified at her words, but I struggled to understand what could happen between his fingers and her shorts. For good measure, the next day, I shook my pillow as hard as I could to remove all of their evidence.

The year my family lived in Texas, we had Wendy. My sisters and I were in the back yard playing tag when my mom, just home from a day of shopping, walked this beautiful Shepherd/Lab mix through the back door. She was not a runt. She had Shepherd colors, whereas Sandy had looked like a yellow lab, and she had lots of thick fluffy black and tan fur that stood up behind her ears, giving her a mane. Around her neck was tied a light blue bandana.

I played with Wendy in our two-story house with a rubber ball. I told her to *sit* and *stay*, then I threw the rubber ball. She looked at me and waited until I said *fetch*, then brought the ball back and dropped it at my feet.

After Rosy, I lost sight of my dad's role in our pet adoption—he was no longer a factor. But he enjoyed Wendy, and used to look at her and say, “Are you a *good* dog?” to which she wagged her tail, hung her black-spotted tongue out the side of her mouth, and pranced around in excitement. Then he would say, “Or are you a *bad* dog?” to which Wendy hung her head and peered up at him with her light brown eyes. The tongue disappeared, she stopped prancing, and just sat and looked at him, confused because she hadn't done anything wrong. He always ended this play by telling her that she was a good dog, and she resumed her frolic.

Wendy ate my first lost tooth.

I lost my first tooth watching *Mr. Magoo* with my family in the living room, eating popcorn. It just fell out. I was so excited, but wanted to finish the movie, so my parents wrapped my valuable treasure in a napkin and placed it on the kitchen counter. When the movie was over, the tooth was gone.

“It probably got brushed off the counter with some popcorn and thrown in the trash,” my mom said. “Or it fell on the floor, and the dog ate it.”

I was furious. I watched Wendy poop for a week after that, hoping that I would find my lost tooth.

“Where is it?” I asked her, as if she could answer. I held her face to mine, cupping her snout with my hand, unwilling to let her pull away. After I felt she had stared at me long enough, felt that my anger had transferred to her, I let her go, and her tail dropped from its usual playful wag. She continued to look at me. I never found my tooth.

A year later, my parents told me that we were moving back to Florida. My dad got a better job offer. Wendy couldn't come with us. We would be living in an apartment for an unknown time, and pets weren't allowed.

"Why can't we get someone to watch her until we find a house?" I asked. Someone could keep her, or we could pay to have her boarded until we had a yard and house for her.

"That gets expensive," my mom said, "and we don't know if we'll find a house in a month or a year."

Before my dad took Wendy to live with a nearby aunt, I hugged her in the kitchen as tight as I could without hurting her, and apologized to her.

"I'm sorry for every time I ever got mad at you," I said, holding her close. "I'm sorry for not forgiving you, for eating my tooth." When I let her go she looked at me as though she understood, and licked my hand.

We found a house only a month after the move, and I asked if we could have Wendy back. My dad said he could drive back up to my aunt's house and bring her back with him. I was so excited, until my mom called my aunt to make the arrangements.

Wendy had run off. She was gone.

I believed for years that Wendy left my aunt's house to look for me, and that she would trot up our driveway at our new house in Florida one day and be home. For this reason, I held on to her old dog tag, a little blue metal bone with her name and our old address engraved on it. She would need it when she came home.

I still have it.

I watched too many Disney movies, and believed that love had a formula. It went something like this: *boy meets girl + boy and girl fall in love + something bad happens + good triumphs over evil = happily ever after*. I expected that this was how relationships worked.

When Steph and Quintin broke up, they broke the formula. They didn't fix it. Didn't overcome their evil. They moved on.

Cody was Steph's second boyfriend. They dated for a year.

Cody was tall and dark, with black hair. He had a strong nose, black eyes. I liked Cody. I thought he was good to Steph, and she seemed to really like him. They met while she was still in high school, just a few months after Quintin. He was a bit older than she was, but he was responsible. He came over for dinner, interacted with the family. I liked him because he made me feel like I still existed when they were at our house, something Quintin never did. I liked him because Steph did not tell me stories about her and Cody and pillows.

Cody watched a lot of horror films, and Steph watched them with him. That was all he ever wanted to watch.

Before I knew of Cody's obsession with horror films, I believed that when they hung out they watched fun movies (which, at fourteen, consisted mostly of Disney movies and, still, *Lord of the Rings*). I imagined Cody's house as a small undefinable white space with some clutter, but mostly clean. Tile floors. Popcorn ceilings. A sliding glass door that led to a dirty, but not too cluttered back porch. They would sit on his white leather couch together, lights dimmed, and watch movies and eat popcorn. In my imagination, this was all they did. In reality, it's probably the only thing they didn't do.

Years after she dated Cody, I learned from my mother that Steph was afraid of the dark. A full grown woman who wouldn't even travel the length of the hall from her bedroom to the bathroom at night. She kept dishes—cups and bowls—in her room from snacks during the day and used those in place of a toilet at night. She couldn't leave the safety of her room. She had developed an unnatural fear, a need for constant human contact to protect her from imagined terrors, from the saws and blades of the movies. Without someone with her at night, she couldn't function.

When I was seventeen, I saw my first horror movie. It was Steven's birthday, and though we weren't dating, we managed to still be friends. If I went with him to see the remake of *Halloween*, it would be his best birthday ever. Having never seen a horror movie, I thought, perhaps, it wouldn't be too bad.

I watched five minutes of the film, then pulled my legs up into the cinema chair where I rooted my face between my knees. When we left, my eyes were blurred from pressing so hard into my own bones, and though I hadn't watched any of the killings, I had heard them, and the screams and bloody gurgles would not leave my ears.

“Are the doors locked?” I asked Steven when we got in his car. We were stopped at a red light on one of the darkest streets in town. He laughed and pushed the button.

“You don't need to be afraid.” I didn't understand his logic. During the film he had wrapped his arm around me. It made little difference then, and he did not offer now to hold my hand. “He only kills sluts and whores, or people who make fun of him,” he said. This did not

console me. “You aren’t any of those people, so you’re fine.” The logic that Michael Myers wasn’t even real did not appeal to me—my imagination was far more elaborate than that.

When he dropped me off at home, I walked down the dark hall to my room, afraid to turn on the light, afraid of what I might see. I lay in bed for a while, and then called Steven.

“I can’t sleep,” I said. I didn’t need to say I was afraid. He knew.

“I’ll stay on the phone until you fall asleep,” he said. I needed that contact, that assurance, to quiet my mind, to make vanish the apparitions my imagination conjured in accordance to the sounds my ears still echoed. When I woke in the morning, my phone was on the floor, open, with no battery life left.

After we moved back to Florida, about a year after we learned that Wendy ran off, we got Maggie. Maggie was another Shepherd/Lab mix—my mom’s favorite breed. Maggie was bigger than Sandy, but not as fluffy as Wendy. She was mostly light tan with a black snout, and the same loving brown eyes. Maggie was never my dog. She was sweet, and playful, and she took to Steph almost immediately.

After Maggie escaped from her pet-sitter, an inconvenience that interrupted a family camping trip, we got rid of her.

Then we got Dixie, a black and tan dachshund. We had her for a month.

Then we got another Rosey from the SPCA. This Rosey looked like Jenna from *Balto*, all red-brown and fluffy, a small wolf. She was highly affectionate to everyone she met. She had separation anxiety. The first night we owned her, we watched a movie in the front room. She wanted to be in there with us. My mom had planned to restrict her to the kitchen to limit hair

control, but Rosey whined at the baby gate set up at the door until my mom took it down. She ran into the room and jumped up on the new leather couch where we sat.

“Down,” my mother shouted at her. Rosey bounced down and the back up again, curled against me and my sisters. “Stay off the couch,” my mother said, scolding her for her behavior. She grabbed Rosey’s collar and led her away from the couch to her kennel. Rosey wouldn’t go in.

“We’ll sit on the floor with her,” I said, my sisters in agreement. We climbed off the couch and onto the floor, where Rosey curled up next to us, finally content.

That night, she chewed a hole in her metal crate. She was supposed to sleep in her kennel at night, to ensure she stayed off the furniture, but she wanted to be around people. We woke up in the morning to find her still working at the metal with her jaws. My parents thought a bigger crate and time to adjust would help, so they dropped us off at a friend’s house for the day while they went and shopped for another crate. In case Rosey got out while we were gone, they put her and her kennel in the garage so she wouldn’t destroy the house.

A few hours later, when we returned, Rosey had completely busted out of her crate. She chewed a hole through the drywall in the garage by the door in an attempt to get inside, where she must have thought we were all waiting for her. The wound on the wall where she clawed her way toward what she thought was home was so deep that the insulation was exposed and torn from its place. My dad replaced the drywall and lining after we returned Rosey to the SPCA. My mom didn’t lie to us. She told us Rosey would probably be put down. Nobody would adopt a dog with such severe separation anxiety. Even after seeing the damage, I didn’t understand why she had to go. I thought we could teach her not to be bad. Not to need people so much. She had been

conditioned though, to a constant need for proximity to people, to connection—a security.

Though we had not conditioned her, I felt my family was responsible for this dog's death. By not giving her a place to call home, a place of constant love, we killed her.

During her senior year of high school, Steph's dating routine sped up, got more varied, less consistent. She dated for thrill, for change, for something different.

There was Neil, red eyed and sweaty the first time he came over. High, my mother said.

Sky never came over. I don't think they ever actually dated, and I never met him. Steph told me about him one night when we went out together, when she stopped by his house.

"I like this guy," she said. "I just want to go in and say hi to him. I'll be right back." I waited in the car. She was gone almost half an hour. When she came back, a bloody flower blossomed on her neck.

There was Robby, the one with droopy dog eyes. He drank. Smoked pot. He ate lots of pizza when he smoked. Steph ate lots of pizza when she was with Robby.

She graduated.

There was Kyle. Dusty. Brendon. Andrew. Steven. Justin. Jason. At least six more whose names I can't remember. The list grew, and that's what it was, a list. A way to keep track of where she was in life. She got bored, got frustrated, traded one out for the next. The first two, it seemed, had set a pattern, an inability to keep, to commit.

I tried for a while to keep track of Steph's history, to remember the boys that made her. But when my cell phone died and I borrowed one from Steph—an old go-phone she had used for

a while with a duct-tape back to hold the battery in place, scratches all over the screen, and buttons caked with makeup residue—I changed my mind.

A single text with no named recipient read: *I want you to fuck me so hard right now. Like full on gagged, pull me by my hair and make me scream fuck.*

I felt my skin flush and I tried not to imagine this scene. Beyond the flush, there was nothing. A disquieting numbness. I deleted the message, along with any interest I maintained at that point in wanting to know the details of my sister's life.

After Steven, I went out with one other guy in high school. We dated for eleven days. The fear of commitment was as present with him as it was with Steven, and afraid of being shallow, I called it off before we got too emotionally attached. I didn't want to allow myself to trade one guy for the next. After that, I left boys alone until I got to college. I thought about dating, imagined it, but left myself guarded, careful not to commit, afraid of not knowing what it looked like, what it might lead to. I didn't want to be used or comforted the way Steph did. I told myself I was happier alone. Alone, I couldn't be hurt.

When I finally met and dated the man that is my fiancé, I found something that worked. I couldn't place it—it wasn't a formula. We were very different in many ways: he was outgoing and sometimes loud while I maintained my traditional silence. He loved cars and mechanics. I loved books and music. But for five years, it worked, and then he proposed. Somewhere along the line, I wonder if Steph felt that I had broken the formula when I found something that worked. Two-and-a-half years after Brian and I started dating, Steph moved to Chicago to be with a guy she had met on a trip—he was into cars, a mechanic.

What was it that created this difference between us? Even between Steph and I and my two younger sisters? Christin is happily married—has been for several years. Rebecca has never dated. Maybe her conditioning is dormant, or has had an effect opposite of Steph's. Steph needed to run from herself while I ran *to* myself, sought solace in my solitude. Christin and Rebecca don't seem to be running at all. Steph didn't want to be alone, but she was comfortable not being attached to anything for too long. I couldn't attach myself to anything, or anyone, and when I finally did, I rooted myself in the impossibility that my space of comfort would ever change.

Storm was afraid of thunder. He was a Blue Meryl Australian Shepherd, three years old when we got him and full of energy. He could clear an eight foot fence. Ours was only four feet, so he could never go outside unsupervised. I remember my mom telling me that he was kind of a gift for me, even though he was a family dog, for doing well in school, staying focused—for not getting distracted the way that Steph did with boys. She never said this last part, but I inferred it. She and my dad were proud of me. I would not let their pride be undeserved. Storm was more my dog than anyone else's.

Storm smiled at people. When anyone came over he got so excited that he lifted his lips, like a snarl, only it wasn't. He lifted his lips, licked his nose, wagged what little cropped tail he had, and stood on his hind feet to lick their face. It terrified most people. They thought he was attacking them. But Storm didn't attack. The only time he got aggressive was during storms. Thunder turned him into a beast, an untamable animal. During one particularly loud storm, he ran to his kennel and hid. I was playing tug-of-war with him in the kitchen when the sound came and he ran. I followed him into the front room where his kennel was and watched him creep to

the back, his hind quarters so far tucked in the corner that his fluff created tufts like pillows between the ribbing of the crate. He hunched over, shoulders sloped, and dropped his head so that it hung between his front legs.

“Storm,” I whispered to him from the kennel door, “it’s okay. You’ll be alright.” He would not look at me, and the thunder grew louder and closer. I stretched my hand through the open door to pet him, calm him. My fingers touched the short fur and whiskers around his cold black nose, and his lips lifted and he bared his teeth at me—a real snarl, not a smile.

I retracted my arm from his place of comfort and left him till the storm calmed.

I didn’t have a lot of time to care for Storm during high school. He was an energetic animal and required frequent walks, and since I was at an institution for over six hours, five days a week, I didn’t have the time to devote to his care. He loved being outside, but could only be out when supervised, and when I came home from school, I did homework. His mass of fur created a dust problem that was resolved only with frequent vacuuming, a task my sisters and I only had time for on the weekends, and my mom grew frustrated with us for not being able to care for him. Eventually he was put outside on a lead with a dog house. Because of the Florida heat, I rarely went out to visit him.

We kept Storm for only a year. It didn’t matter that he was a gift. He did not fit with the context of our ever changing lives, so, like everything else, we let him go.

WHAT, THEN, ARE WE?

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace.

2 Timothy 2:22

It was summer, and we sat in Josiah's parked car in the vacant dimly lit parking lot adjacent to the city playhouse. We had just seen "Robin Hood." Correction—I had seen the show. Josiah had played the part of Robin.

The set with its cardboard castles reminded me of the tales of King Arthur, of medieval knights and maidens and dragons. I had just read *The Once and Future King* for a class in school over Spring Break. I loved it. Stories of worlds where adventures happened, like nothing I knew. Immersing myself into Narnia, Middle Earth, and ancient England was my favorite pastime. If I couldn't have those worlds I would devour *Jane Eyre* or join Elizabeth Bennet in her quest for natural love. I loved the language of the people in these books. So rich. Unlike the slang and profanity I heard every day in the halls of Astronaut High.

I sat in the passenger seat of Josiah's car, thinking about these things. The crowd had dispersed minutes after the show. Downtown was deserted. It was only eight o'clock. My parents had given me a ten o'clock curfew—I might as well use it.

I hadn't yet said anything to Josiah except the expected congratulations.

He still had on his stage makeup. He had exchanged the tattered earth colored garments of his costume, as well as his plastic sword, knife, and of course, bow and arrows for more modern dress—torn jeans and a yellow Polo. What remained was the natural unruly dusty brown hair falling into his steel blue eyes, still rimmed with black eyeliner. The skin on his face was

caked with foundation, powder, and blush to hide the shine and give him color under the glaring bleaching wash of the spotlight. There was a light square on his left cheek where tape had held his mike in place.

If he could just really be Robin Hood, or a medieval knight, maybe I wouldn't have found it so unnatural to talk to him here, alone in his car. He *could* be chivalrous.

I didn't really know why I was here—at the show, with Josiah, or in his car. I did not know Josiah very well. What we had in common were two friends, Alec and Amber, whom I had come with to the show, and who had left immediately after. We came as a group to support a mutual friend, and after the show Josiah wanted to hang out and go somewhere for pancakes, even though it was eight at night. When Alec and Amber said no and left, I felt I couldn't leave too.

I supposed that was why I was here. Yes, that was the reason, wasn't it? I stayed to be nice, to do the right thing. I stayed not because I secretly liked Josiah, not because I thought or wished that anything might happen—and by *anything* I didn't mean sex. By *anything* I meant something chivalrous and chaste, like in one of my books. Like an embrace between Darcy and Elizabeth, that would leave me beautifully conflicted about love. By *anything* I meant that maybe Josiah would take my hand and tell me he liked me too, that he would like to see me again.

But I didn't know that this was what I wanted. Didn't know that my sixteen-year-old body was reacting to hormones, that these urges, chaste or not, were natural. No one had told me this. No one had told me what to do if I found myself alone in a car with a guy that I couldn't admit I liked. No one told me I might find myself anywhere—I was simply expected to be in control of my faculties at all times. What they had told me, my parents and mentors, at home and

at church, was that I should love God with all my heart, stay pure until marriage, and not lust. These were the rules, the Commandments. If I could do these things, I thought, these simple things, I could honor my parents and God. I could be a good person.

I supposed that I was here to go eat pancakes with Josiah. Like a casual date. I was, consequently, unprepared when Josiah asked me a very simple question.

“Lacey,” he said, “Do you like me?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I knew what he meant. I hadn’t admitted to myself that I liked him. I wasn’t supposed to like him. He was Episcopalian, I was Baptist. I might as well date a Catholic and pray to Mary. I was devoted in my Sunday attendance, at church every Sunday morning, evening, and at prayer meetings during the week. He was a Christmas and Easter Christian. He drank, and he was only seventeen. The only alcohol I had ever tasted was communion wine, and when I told my mom I liked the brief warm fuzzy feeling I got as I swallowed the wine, she lectured me on the dangers of alcohol, how easy it was to get addicted to, how little it took to get drunk, and that once I was drunk, who knew *what* could happen.

But here I was, confronted with this question.

“I like you,” Josiah said. “You’re different.”

I slipped both my feet out of the tan leather flip-flops on the floorboard and pulled my legs up into my chest and wrapped my hands around my knees. I had thought this was what I was waiting for. Now I wasn’t so sure.

“Different how?” I asked. His gaze made me uncomfortable. I groped for something to occupy my hands—the seatbelt I wasn’t wearing, the string hanging from the seam of my hand-me-down brown t-shirt.

Josiah didn't fidget in his seat. He didn't play awkwardly with his seatbelt or the knobs on the dash. He pulled out a pack of Marlboros and lit up a cigarette, cracked the window to vent the smoke, and looked directly at me.

"I don't know," he said, taking a drag from the cigarette. "I can't place it, but you're not like everybody else. Say damn." I stared blankly at him as he leaned across the center console, his face inches from mine. I could smell the cigarette on his breath and in the air. "Say shit. Say fuck. Say hell."

"What? Why?" I asked, choking back a cough. I didn't understand how he could utter these unwholesome words so carelessly, as if they had no consequences.

"Just say it," he said. He was not harsh in the command. He was almost pleading.

"No," I said. "I can't."

"Why?"

"Because they're bad words." I stared at the floor. I had answered without thinking. Nobody else I knew thought they were bad words. Why did I? Who told me that they were bad? I didn't think that not saying them made me a better person. I simply couldn't utter them without guilt, and I couldn't explain it.

"You have to relax a little. Live. Screw up. Stop always trying to be so perfect."

"I'm not perfect." I didn't know how Josiah thought I was perfect. I went to church three times a week, but I didn't pray every day like my parents did. I did not say the words that he had asked of me, but sometimes I thought them. Sometimes, when I hit my head on a cabinet door, or stubbed my toe on the concrete driveway outside the garage I would think *shit*, or *fuck*, or *hell*. I had hated people, and my pastor said that the Bible said that to hate someone was like

committing murder in my heart. I had lied. I couldn't remember a specific lie, but I was sure I had told one.

I was not perfect. A year ago, when I was volunteering at the local library for community service hours I had been asked to shelve some romance novels. I did not know that was what they were. The books were all short, about seven inches tall, brightly colored covers embossed with gold letters for titles. Some had pictures of knights on big stallions. Others had women in flowing gowns with long wavy hair. Some had both. They looked to be medieval novels.

In the pin-dropping silence of the library, I opened one of these books behind the cover of a shelf, chose a random page, and started reading. What I found was not a heroic adventure. It was not a story of a gallant knight and fair maiden. What I read was enticing, intoxicating, and riveting. Smooth rounded protrusions from the body, soft flesh, deep penetrating cries of pleasure. The particular book I had opened had a scene where the man had strapped the woman to a chair and he let his fingers circle her nipples, but never touched them directly. While he did this the woman looked out the window in the room and focused her eyes on the smoothest branch of the tree outside, until the man touched her. I got lost in the world of sex, of seduction, until the librarian whispered my name from the other side of the shelf.

“Are you almost done?” the librarian asked. “I have another stack of books for you to shelve.”

I nodded, and surge of heat crept up my neck. I quickly closed the book and crammed it onto the already full shelf where countless other love adventures waited to be read. I didn't dare get caught reading this one.

I thought about it all day, about the man with the exotic name that I couldn't pronounce and the unnamed woman with flowing black hair. I read the covers of half of the books that I put up after, wondering what was on the pages inside.

I noticed a warm tingling sensation between my legs. The more covers I read the stronger this sensation became. I wasn't sure what to do with this feeling, how to interpret it. There was a feeling like the need to pee, but when I went to the bathroom all I found was a slick unfamiliar substance pooled in my underwear. I touched myself, and found that the substance was there too, and that it felt good when I touched myself. But after this touch I felt guilty. So guilty that I evaded the romance section of the library for the duration of my volunteer service there. I was not perfect.

Before I could say anything else, Josiah leaned over and kissed me. Not a long kiss. Just a quick kiss on the lips. A kiss glossed in nicotine and smoke.

"I've never kissed before," I said as he sat back in his seat. There were needles all over my face. The blood crawling through my veins drummed loudly in my ears. His action terrified me. What had he just done?

The truth was I had never *successfully* kissed. I had been out with Alec a few months ago on a sort-of date. At the end of the night, after going out to the movies and dinner, Alec walked me to the door of my parents' house, a chivalrous knight. He ruined that chivalry for me when he tried to kiss me.

He didn't lean in gently to give me warning. Didn't hold my hand, or touch the back of my neck with his fingers. He went straight for it, tongue and all, and I panicked. I closed my mouth, pursed my lips, and pulled away like a girl jumping from an insect.

“Sorry,” I said to Alec. “I’ve never done this before.” The blood had been in my ears then too, threatening to reveal my nerves.

“Do you want to try again,” he asked, leaning in as if I had already agreed.

“No,” I said. “Not right now.” He tasted like spit and tuna, and I had never had someone’s tongue in my mouth. It wasn’t natural. I said goodnight and rushed into my house where I locked the door behind me.

I looked over at Josiah. I didn’t count the thing with Alec, whatever that was. I hadn’t reciprocated the act, so it wasn’t my first kiss. It would be the reason I would be unable to kiss my future fiancé for the first three months of our relationship, but I didn’t know that. It didn’t bother me that what Josiah just did would probably make Alec furious. It did occur to me that perhaps this was why Josiah had kissed me just now. That he might be testing the waters to see how far he could go. That maybe he was trying to one-up Alec. But I dismissed that thought. It wasn’t what I wanted to believe of Josiah. I was still trying to fit him into my preconceived romantic mold.

But I wasn’t comfortable around Josiah. The eyeliner he wore darkened his eyes, brought his features out more. The powder left from the stage softened his skin, hid the natural oils and blemishes. He looked flawless, except for the small white patch from the tape. Not like me. I had on eyeliner too, but it had smeared in the corners of my eyes. I had on barely any foundation, and only a light dusting of powder and blush. I felt exposed, like Josiah could see deep into every greasy pore on my face. My naturally limp hair had gone frizzy from the night’s humidity, and it was possible my breath smelled like dinner—garlic bread and spaghetti. Josiah’s did not, though I couldn’t smell much besides his cigarette.

He leaned over and kissed me again, a little more forcefully this time, but still without tongue. When his force hit me, I pulled away, eyes shut tight, lips even tighter, like taking a bite of a lemon, afraid of a repeat of Alec.

“Don’t,” I said. “I can’t.”

“Can’t what?” he said, taking a final drag from his cigarette before dropping it out the cracked window. He did everything so casually.

“Can’t kiss,” I said. “I don’t know how.” Not only was I not sure how, but I wasn’t sure I should be doing this at all. I could not date Josiah, even if I wanted to. And I wasn’t so sure now that I didn’t want to. Everything I knew of love had come from my parents, devout Baptists, and books. Love was God inspired, God centered, and full of Disney-like romance and clichés. Josiah was as far from everything I knew as I could get, which was probably why I liked him. He lived outside the box, and was everything I would not allow myself to be.

“It’s easy,” he said. “And fun.”

I did not think kissing sounded fun. A light kiss on the cheek, or peck on the lips was all I thought I could handle. It was all I could admit that I wanted. But what I suspected Josiah meant was making out, and how could allowing him to slide his tobacco flavored tongue into my mouth, sharing air and bad breath and germs, be fun?

“I don’t know,” I said.

I had always dreamed that my first kiss would be magical. That it would be a sign of true love. Books and movies had given me what I did not yet know was a false sense of reality. Josiah’s kiss wasn’t magical. It certainly wasn’t God inspired. I didn’t feel true love. I felt confused, and I was worried that if I let him kiss me again, if I kissed him back, he would expect

more. What if he tried to have sex with me? Didn't sex start with innocent kisses? That was what my parents had told me. The thought made me panic. My mother told me once that I would not fall in love with and marry the first man I ever dated, and I had never yet been in a relationship with anyone. I would fall in love, my mother said, and end up with a broken heart one or two times before I found the right one, which was why I had to guard myself, had to protect every part of my purity. I didn't want my mother to be right. Didn't want a broken heart. How could someone anticipate a broken heart so matter-of-factly?

"I think we should go get those pancakes," I said, tucking a strand of my frizzy brown hair behind my ear.

Josiah laughed. "Okay" he said. He didn't sound upset, even though I had refused to kiss him. This made me glad. When I had closed the door on Alec, he hadn't talked to me for a whole week. Wouldn't even look at me in the hallway at school. I didn't understand. I didn't think I had done anything wrong. Alec had been my friend. I didn't think I had to kiss him to be his friend. I was glad we were going to get something to eat. Eating would give me something to do with my hands. With food in my mouth I wouldn't have to talk, wouldn't need an excuse to sit quietly. Food would make things with Josiah less awkward.

IHOP wasn't as crowded as I thought it might be. I had suspected that some of the cast from the show would be here, but if they were I didn't see them. That was fine. Josiah and I would share a table, maybe a plate. A casual late dinner together. Nothing more.

"How many?" a super skinny girl in black pants and polo asked when we walked in the double doors. I pulled at the hem of my t-shirt as Josiah answered.

“Two,” he said.

The hostess led us to a small corner booth and Josiah took the seat against the wall. I sat opposite of him.

I quickly opened my menu, flat on the table, and began scanning the pages.

“I was thinking maybe we could split a stack,” Josiah said. He left his own menu closed.

“Okay” I said. I didn’t figure I could eat a whole stack anyway. I wasn’t very big, though the t-shirt I had on masked whatever figure was underneath it. I rarely wore anything but t-shirts to school too. I had a little bit of pudg around the top of my pants that I was not okay with.

“How about the chocolate chip ones, with extra cool whip on top? And chocolate milk?” Josiah asked.

“Sure,” I agreed. “Sounds good.”

When our server came—a woman I suspected ate butter-smothered pancakes and greasy bacon for breakfast every day—we ordered our meal with two chocolate milks. The woman nodded as she wrote down our order, her messy black bun bobbing on top of her pale round face. “It’ll be extra for the cool whip,” she said. Josiah nodded his consent, and then she left.

The dining room was mostly quiet, with a few older couples at surrounding tables. The smell of the day’s orders lingered in the air—grease and butter, pastries, eggs—sticky as the syrup we were about to eat.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I said, shouldering my little sack purse. “I’ll be right back.”

I could feel Josiah watch me walk off. While I was gone the waitress brought our drinks. I wondered what Alec would think of us having dinner together. Sharing a plate. Alec hadn’t

been able to kiss me. He had admitted that I denied him. Josiah hadn't got any tongue, but I hadn't run away. I wondered if he would tell Alec.

I returned as the waitress brought our food out. A plate of three huge chocolate chip pancakes, butter, a small pitcher of syrup, and powder sugar. I had brushed some of the frizz out of my hair. The eyeliner in the corners of my eyes was gone, smudged back into place, and I had powdered my face.

"Thank you," I said as the woman laid the plate on the table.

"Uh-huh," the woman replied. "Anything else for you two right now?"

"Nope, this looks good," Josiah replied, and the woman walked away.

I already had my fork out of the napkin. I laid the unused silverware across the plate so that it didn't touch the table and used my fork to spread butter in between each of the pancakes. When I was done, I drizzled syrup over the entire plate, including the cool whip. I took a bite.

"Mmm."

Josiah took a bite too. "Wow," he said, mouth half full. "This is delicious."

I nodded as I chewed, refusing to speak with my mouth full. After I swallowed I took a sip of my milk. Josiah watched as I put my lips around the straw and sucked. I wondered what he was thinking. I took another bite. And another. Years later, I would wonder if he realized how naïve I was. I was so religious and ignorant of anything outside my religion. I tried too hard to be a good person. I would wonder if he liked me that way, liked that I could be so unspoiled by the world in which I lived, or if he saw me as an easy target. He had said that he wanted to show me everything I was missing out on. Did he want to kiss me? Make out with me? Maybe more? I

wondered again if maybe he only wanted me because he knew I wouldn't let him have me, if he only wanted to trump Alec's failed endeavors.

I let Josiah have the last few bites of pancake. I had carefully evaded where his fork had touched through the whole plate, avoiding the germs that I knew accompanied his fork. Eating where it had touched would be one step closer to kissing him, to sharing his germs, and I wasn't ready for that.

It never occurred to me that this thought process was unusual, that normal people would not think twice about kissing a boy. Why did I? Was it as simple as personality? The way I was raised? Why was this one thing so easy for so many people, and not me?

"That was delicious," Josiah said as he finished the last bite.

"It was," I said. I didn't thank him for dinner, because he hadn't paid the tab yet, and if he split it with me then a thank you would be obsolete. Instead, I took another sip of my almost gone milk.

"Now what," Josiah said. He flagged the waitress and asked for the check.

"I have to go home," I said, pointing to my watch. "Curfew." I noticed that Josiah's features dropped slightly, though he simply said okay, didn't give me a hard time about having a curfew. "But I had fun tonight," I said by way of apology. It was mostly true. I liked hanging out with Josiah, even though I still didn't know how I wanted to feel about him.

When the waitress brought the check, Josiah looked it over and said, "Cool. Looks like she forgot to charge us for the cool whip."

"Nice." Secretly, I wondered if we should tell the waitress what she forgot.

"That makes it five bucks each, and that includes the tip."

I naturally reached for my purse, pulling my wallet from a side pouch. I counted out five ones, placed them on the check in the middle of the table, careful not to set them in syrup, and put my pocket book back in my bag.

SHAPE ME A WOMAN

But these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I Corinthians 13:13

When I met the man who would become my husband, I was not looking for love, nor was there any magical Disneyesque sweeping beneath my feet. I was eighteen and had just started my first semester of community college. A mutual friend introduced us, not because she was playing match-maker, but because she had a class with me, and a class with him, and we found ourselves, the three of us, standing outside the building hall together, waiting for our class to start. This was what the three of us had in common.

I knew absolutely nothing about him. Didn't know that he was a motor head. That he was artistic. Played guitar. I knew we had class together, and that he was fun to talk to. I knew I liked him, but there was not, at first, anything magic.

There was, however, an almost primitive instinct that this man was good for me, had something that I wanted, needed, didn't want to lose. I don't mean I was a cave woman. I didn't grab him by his hair and drag him back to my cave to claim him as my own. But there was a natural inclination for me to appeal to him, to want him to like me back.

This primitive instinct, of course, no longer governs my relationship with Brian. We dated for four years before he proposed, and in that time we learned to not just want each other. We learned to understand each other's interests, know each other's history and passions.

But this guttural feeling, the magnetism that existed between us, that he never observed until after we had dated for a while, strikes me. I want to know where it came from, why it was there. It was primitive, sure, but where did I learn this instinct?

The hardware store cashier was my first job. When I walked through the glass doors on my first day, I was terrified. I was shaking. My voice was unsteady as I answered questions, *yes* and *no*, and *how do I*—or *what does this do*?

When I first saw Lloyd, first laid eyes on him, I thought that he was good looking. Dirty blonde hair, bright eyes, thin but muscular arms. Nothing extraordinary, but fun to look at and fun to talk to.

I was sixteen, a junior in high school, and he was in college—twenty-one? Twenty-two?

At first I was shy, very quiet and polite. Then he told me he was disappointed, that my application made me seem outgoing, but I wasn't. I said I would open up the more he got to know me. I tried desperately to be a little more vocal, to not disappoint him.

My silence became sarcasm—tongue and cheek—he dished it out, I gave it back.

He took an interest in my private life, my interests—I liked to read and loved to sing. I was increasingly stressed about my first AP class. He encouraged me in ways that my closest friends and family didn't. I considered him a close friend.

Our philosophical and political conversations never waned. He always had an opinion, and I craved that opinion. He was refreshing. I counted down the minutes every day at school until I left for work, where I would get to see him. Talk to him. Listen to him. Be close to him. Let his knowledge bleed over to me.

I thought he was smart. He was really going somewhere. Had something to offer this desperate God-forsaken world.

I imagined his path crossed mine for a reason. What was that reason? I didn't know.

I didn't drive yet, so one evening Steph picked me up after hours. I hadn't finished counting my drawer, so Lloyd invited her in to wait.

I could tell by the way he talked with Steph, the tone of his voice, the way he suddenly ignored me, that he liked her. When he recommended that Steph put in an application, said that he would put in a good word for her, Steph agreed, and behind the counter, I was silently angry.

We didn't talk on the ride home.

When Steph got hired, I tried not to mind. Tried to ignore that Lloyd ignored me whenever Steph was around. When Steph wasn't there, things were normal, and I forgot that I was angry with him. But when Steph was there, things weren't normal. Especially at Christmas.

Especially under the mistletoe.

The window artist had drawn mistletoe in the center of the glass pane above the double doors. I hadn't even noticed it, until Lloyd did.

I was working with Steph. She was sweeping the black rubber floor mat just inside the doors while I ran the register. Only there wasn't anyone in the check-out line, so when Lloyd walked through the glass doors and tracked over the area Steph had just cleaned, I was free to listen.

"Lloyd," Steph said in frustration, "I just swept that spot." She placed her arms on her hips, not happy.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'll make it up to you somehow."

Steph looked skeptical while Lloyd thought for a minute.

“I got it,” he said, pleased with himself. “Look up.”

Steph looked up. “So?”

“So, we’re standing right under the mistletoe,” Lloyd grinned, too eager.

“Haha, right,” Steph said. “In your dreams.” She walked off to clean something else, while Lloyd stood for a moment, puzzled.

“Your sister isn’t very nice,” he said to me before he walked away.

Behind the counter, trying not to stare, I wished desperately that he looked at me the same way he looked at Steph.

From that moment, until the holidays ended and the mistletoe was washed from the window, I spent as much time as I could under the mistletoe. If I saw him walking by, or coming up to the door, I grabbed the broom and stood as immediately close to the mistletoe as I could, hoping he would notice.

He did.

“Weren’t you just sweeping that mat like an hour ago?” he asked.

“It got dirty again,” I replied, and he walked away.

I just wanted him to notice. To know how much I needed him to notice. I wanted him to look at me like he looked at Steph. To say, “We’re standing under mistletoe,” in the same dreamy voice he used on Steph. Only I wouldn’t walk away.

I would let him kiss me. I thought that was what I would let him do. I had no idea what it would feel like. But he left me there, waiting.

In 1998, when I was eight years old, my family moved from Florida to Texas and I experienced my first crush. James was the older brother of Becky, the neighbor girl that my sisters and I played with. He had a round face with constantly flushed cheeks, and wire-rimmed glasses.

I have two distinct memories of James. The first occurred in the portal of our fence where a knot had been knocked loose, and I could see through to his yard. The hole was large enough to peer through with relative ease, and carry on a conversation. This is precisely what he had been doing with my little sister, Christin, when I walked outside.

Christin was a round and chubby little girl. With white blonde hair, pinchable cheeks, and a cuddly personality, it was hard for people not to love her. This is, perhaps, the precise reason that Stephanie and I often excluded her from our activities—I, at least, was jealous.

Christin was passing flowers to James through the hole in the fence. Maybe it was clovers. I was unhappy. The moment she walked away for more flowers I bolted to the fence, smashed my face against the wood, and found James sitting just out of my reach.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. It was a hot Texas summer afternoon, maybe even a weekend, since James wasn’t in school. I was bare-foot in t-shirt and shorts, long stringy brown-blond hair hanging down my sweaty back.

“Christin is giving me flowers, see?” he said as he held up little daisies and clovers for me to see.

“Oh,” I said, “well I have some of those too.” I stooped and picked a handful of grass and clovers and, instead of passing them through the portal, climbed up the supporting beams along the fence and handed my gift directly to James. He had very little interest.

To my dismay, I watched as my little sister passed more weeds through the fence to James, who gladly accepted them with a smile. As she scampered away again I climbed down back to the ground, searching for anything to trump my sister's gifts. I found a handful of glittering pebbles, rocks used as fillers in the holes our dog had dug under the fence; treasures. Back atop the fence, I handed James my improvised gift.

"That one is quartz," I said, pointing to one with a creamy pink color to it.

"I don't think so," he said, holding it to the light and squinting through his glasses. "You just got these from under the fence. But thanks," he said. I almost smiled as he pocketed the rocks. "Where'd Christin go?" My almost-smile vanished.

Back on the ground, I pulled a daisy from the grass and nested myself in a tree on the opposite side of the yard and plucked the petals one by one.

"He loves me, he loves me not."

The second of these memories involves the violation of a sacred girl pact made somewhere in the house in Texas. I told Stephanie and Becky, James's sister, of my crush on James. I confided my eight-year-old self to them, and they swore not to tell.

They pinky-promised.

They strapped on rollerblades and skated up and down our street to the prevailing chorus, *Lacey has a crush on James*. I ran upstairs where I locked myself in my room and sat on the window seat and cried. I told my mother what they had done, and she made Stephanie apologize. I didn't forgive her. Not then.

Instead, later, I artistically sketched her likeness on the driveway in various shades of sidewalk chalk, strapped on my own pair of rollerblades, and skated over her face, wishing her

dead. My childish voodoo also included dumping a bucket of water over the sketch while she watched in horror from the garage.

“Now you’re drowning,” I said, as if my taunting could inflict physical hurt on her. She needed to hurt with the same inexplicable pain that I felt over James. When she told our mother what I had done, I too was mad to apologize.

“You don’t really want your sister to die,” my mother said. I cried because I did not comprehend the severity of what I had wishfully inflicted upon her. No, I did not really want her out of my life forever—dead—she just needed to know how deeply she had wounded me. I was wounded because she betrayed my trust. I was irrevocably embarrassed because James knew—he had heard and he knew—I was exposed, and that, somehow, was confounding and painful.

These memories do not haunt or scar me. I am not incapable of love because of these experiences. I have long since moved away from my childish adoration of James, and am reconciled with my sisters. These are not life altering moments. But they are a fraction of my past, a memory that, until now, I had forgotten existed. A memory that, somewhere along the spine of my humanity, shaped me. Formed me as a woman. Contributed something to the mosaic that is my life.

Tell me. Tell me how they fit.

I moved away from my adoration of James not just emotionally, but physically. Florida became my home again by the end of 1999, and by 2000, John Gilmore was my new crush. He lived in the back of my neighborhood, and played with my best friend’s older brother.

My attachment to John was competitive, a proof that I could keep up with, well, just keep up. It was Kathleen's idea first. As best friends we shared all our secrets, which, at ten years old were mostly inconsequential. When she confided in me that she thought her brother's friend, Tyler, was cute, I of course had to target someone as my crush. I would not be outdone.

This drive was furthered by after school play dates with the neighbor girl, who had a crush on a boy named Trey, and who wrote love notes and diary entries about her unprofessed love.

When, in a frenzy of pre-teen creativity, the neighbor girl suggested writing love letters as an afternoon activity, my heart stopped. I didn't have anyone to write a love letter to—Disney princes, who had constituted many of my crushes until then, were a little less likely to materialize at the call of a love note than an actual person, someone like Tyler or Trey. I was in trouble.

Somewhere in the course of these events I caught a glimpse of John—scrawny, stick legs, cute squinty eyes (eyes I would later see repeated in an unrelated boy several years my junior who I felt guilty for finding cute), freckle-faced, and sweaty—and I crushed hard. Immediately I told Kathleen of my new development, but I protected, for a while, his name from my older sister. Kathleen was ecstatic. We each had a crush about whom we could chatter endlessly under the cover of tent forts, between competitive video games (with the boys, intended to impress them), and in the back yard, running from her brother and his friends in an imaginary pioneers and Indians raid.

“They’re coming!” Kathleen squealed as she darted in and out of towering pines. With her warning I had just enough time to grab an armful of tall grain-like weeds, our pretend harvest, and run.

We screamed, whooped, and hollered our way through the dense trees and carpet of pine needles, always ahead, always careful to make certain that we didn’t lose them—if we did we doubled back until they caught up. If they lost interest in the chase after destroying our pine needle house, mud cakes, berry pies, and weed harvests, we taunted them until they resumed interest.

Through the trees. Swift. Light. Cunning. Hair whipping across my neck and face. Beads of sweat down my neck and sour pools under my arms. Dirt between my toes.

Suddenly, to my left, was John. Keeping pace with me. Dodging trees and branches. Reaching out. A touch on the arm. On the shoulder. On my hand. A tag. What now? *You have caught me, what now?*

He faded back into the trees.

“He caught me,” I said to Kathleen between breaths when we met up at a designated safe spot after the chase. “He caught me, and let me go.”

“Wow,” she said.

I don’t know what I expected. Did I want him to tackle me to the ground? Or to read my love notes?

Maybe I just liked the exhilaration of the chase.

A rush of excitement at the prospect of being hunted, inevitably captured, at their mercy.

Maybe I wanted him to tackle me to the ground. Press his lips against mine. Tell me that he had a crush me. I was only ten years old. Where did these ideas come from, rising and swelling inside me?

From my sister, with her visions of heroism, knights in shining armor, reversed acts of heroics—where did her imagination learn this method of thought, and why did mine take to it so naturally? There was no resistance, no urge to stay in childish innocence. From my best friend confiding in me her whims of romance, the two of us plotting and designing encounters with the opposite sex to appease our fascination. At the mere suggestion, my mind and heart concocted scenarios in which I might find myself in some extremely taboo sense of contact. A bump on the shoulder. His finger touching mine. Holding hands. All these things I wanted so desperately—why? What taught me to want them?

A year later, Kathleen moved.

I never saw John again.

My earliest memories of love are from childhood cartoons. My first crushes were Disney characters, namely Prince Philip from *Sleeping Beauty* and Aladdin. Perhaps this is where I learned to love.

“Have you ever imagined rescuing a Disney prince from the dungeon?” Steph asked.

“No,” I said. Of course I had not. At five I was much more interested in the sing-along songs and bright colors on the TV screen than the men as characters in them. But she had my attention, and it wasn’t long before we were making sheet tents in the middle of the night, dimly

lit by flashlights, under the fortress of a bunk bed in our shared pink bedroom, sharing ideas of rescue and heroism.

“I like to imagine that the prince has just been captured, and is about to get tortured, when I save him,” she said. The details of this rescue were exquisite—flying dragons, racing horses, shining armor—she burst through the dungeon window just in time to save the prince, slay the villain, and escape with her true love.

We imagined and shared our stories of heroism by night. We had secret lives. Alter egos, though we did not know that’s what we were creating. When our parents went to bed, our imaginations became active. Polly Pocket size princes and princesses represented our story board—characters, tangible exhibitions of our imagined romances.

“Jasmine is me,” Steph said, “And you can be Belle.” Aladdin had to be shared, because no matter how hard we tried, the Beast was never the same as a human prince. Sometimes the Beast was the villain.

“Now pretend that he’s about to attack Aladdin,” Steph said. I held the Beast above the tiny Aladdin and felt adrenaline move through me, a warming rush of sensation that a child can’t recognize as anything but heat. As the Beast hovered, Jasmine swung down through some imagined open window and swept Aladdin away to safety. We enacted these adventures on an almost nightly basis.

“You girls need to put out the lights and go to bed,” my dad said from the hall. Busted. Down came the cotton walls of our fortress, out went the lights, and I was left to my imagination, worlds away, where a little girl could rescue a prince.

These ideas are not normal. The Disney movies I grew up watching, the same movies Steph watched, were not empowering to women in any way. In *Snow White*, Snow White is dependent upon Prince Charming's kiss. Without it, she cannot live. For Cinderella, happily ever after is forever, as long as the prince understands her choice of footwear. Sleeping Beauty grew up in a remote cottage with three old fairies before she was tricked into a magic sleep from which only true love's kiss could wake her. She was both sheltered and dependent on another for life. *Beauty and the Beast* reverses this role slightly in that the Beast is dependent on Belle's ability to see past the monster for his freedom, but Belle is also a slave to the Beast for her father's freedom. These stories thrive on the idea that happy endings are the result of kissing a frog. But look at the story. Who is the frog?

Almost every girl in America grows up watching cartoons and movies with fairy tale endings. There's always a happily ever after. There's always a prince saving a princess. We look at cultures outside of this paradigm and wonder what's wrong with them, why they still perform arranged marriages, and how God-awful it must be to marry someone you may have never met. But what if they are the ones who have it right? What if love as a growing concept, an abstract that develops with time, is more accurate than the idea of something more romantic?

In my childhood stories, little girls grow up believing in happily ever after. But that's not how it works. My crush on James was not romantic, nor was my crush on John. And most certainly, when John tagged me, he was thinking none of the things that Kathleen and I thought about. These events did not result in a happy ending.

I grew up believing in something that does not exist.

I grew up believing in something effortless; in bliss; in a state of happy existence naturally followed by marriage, and babies, and never growing old and ugly; peaceful.

No.

This kind of life requires effort on both sides—give and receive—pull and be pulled; is full of happiness, but it also carries sorrow, guilt, anger, and pain; is a process; learned; little by little; a day at a time.

These are the burdens of love. This way, it doesn't look like much of a fairy tale.

So why am I driven by compulsions to feel a certain way, to experience specific emotions, as if there is a prescription pill for life—take one and call the doctor in the morning? Take one and kiss a frog in the morning.

Something drove me to be the little girl with the crush on the neighbor boy. Something taught me to ache for the touch of a man.

I want to know where these ideas began. Are they primal—an instinctive need to reproduce? That would make me just an organic mass of hormonal evolution, primitive instincts and desires, and I refuse to believe that. Deep down, I believe I can experience some growing developing thing, the kind of thing that other cultures find in arranged marriages, actual soul-gripping-all-of-my-heart love. I believe I can want someone, care for someone not of instinct or biological need, but simply because I can.

Philosopher Luce Irigaray exercised the opinion that to say *I love you*, is to proclaim a state of dominance, of possession of the beloved.

When I say these words to Brian, I mean just that. I love him and can't imagine life without him. I do not own him, or possess him. The cave woman in me is subdued.

Instead of *I love you*, Irigaray recommended the phrase, *I love to you*. I direct my love *at* you. I share my happiness *with* you. I love *in your direction*.

Irigaray would rob me of my most desired comforts.

When I say *I love you* to Brian, I mean he is the target of my desires. He is the dream I've dreamt a hundred times. His soul calls to mine in a ritualistic dance almost primitive, and I answer a simple answer, the only answer I know. *I love you*.

Maybe my primal nature isn't as dead as I thought.

And when he says *I love you*, what I want him to say, what I want him to mean is that he knows me, knows my wants and needs, and that he wants to satisfy me. That he found me and came to me, drew me into him because I am his. Mean that he owns me—it's okay—I want him to possess me, to always be a part of my life. A permanent fixture. Claim me as his own. I surrender. I give myself to him.

Never leave.

I love you. *I love you. I love you.*

ON THIS SUBJECT OF WOMANHOOD

Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance.

Genesis 12:11

We were on a camping trip at Silver Springs. My mom had just put my two younger sisters to bed. Stephanie, my older sister, stayed up. “When a man and a woman love each other,” my mom said, “and they love God, they get married.” We were done roasting marshmallows for the night. The fire burned low. Most of the light encompassing us came from the lantern hanging on a hook a couple of feet away. Still firelight, but more concentrated than the camp fire.

I sat in my blue canvas foldable chair, legs crossed under my body, clad in grubby tennis shoes, some old jeans that I’d inherited from Stephanie, and a sweatshirt. My freshly washed hair had dried hours ago in the warmth of the fire, absorbing the smoke. Next to me, Stephanie sat poking a long palm branch into the glowing embers. She had already heard this talk. Across from us, through the rippling heat vapors, sat my parents. My father was present, but I only remember my mother speaking.

“Like you and Daddy?” I asked, making the connection.

“Yes, like me and Daddy,” she agreed. “When a man and a woman are married, they want to be together, to have sex.”

Stephanie jabbed a particularly bright ember.

“What’s sex?” I asked. I had never heard this word, had no idea what it meant. Didn’t know that it would one day be expected of me, that I would one day want it.

Instead of explaining how point A enters point B, my mother simply said, “It’s how babies are made.” As best I could remember, I had never asked my parents how babies were made. It simply was not a process in which I had any interest. But here they were, telling me about it anyway, so I asked questions.

“How does that happen?” I asked. I had a sense that what we were talking about was important, but it felt silly to me. Marriage and love were for old people. I wasn’t old. I was ten.

“A man and a woman have to sleep together,” she answered. “They take their clothes off and—” maybe she was about to tell me about point A and point B, but I cut her off before she could.

“They take their clothes off?” I asked.

“Shh,” she said as Stephanie laughed at my astonishment. “Your sisters are in bed.” There was a pause in our conversation while Stephanie continued to laugh.

“Why would they take their clothes off?” I asked, confused by this action. I wore clothes all the time. The only time I was ever naked was when I bathed. I had seen my mother naked before, years ago—an ancient memory—changing or in the shower, but never my father, never a man at all.

“Because they are attracted to each other,” she said.

I thought this over for a minute.

“When I get married,” I said, “I don’t want a guy to see me naked.” The idea of a husband being different than just a guy was still unexplored. In two years, a friend would ask me if I ever wondered where my future husband was at any given moment—what he might be doing while I was twelve years old, at my desk doing homework, or in the yard playing with mud, as if

he were an entity locked in a time capsule just waiting for me to discover him in all his already formed perfection—I never had. But after she asked, I thought about it often. I tried to puzzle out this strange being who was inevitably part of my future, and thought about who he might be.

“You’ll have to if you ever want to have kids,” Stephanie said. I wondered if she knew all the answers already, understood this strange concept of sex.

“Then I’ll just turn out the lights before I get into bed and undress under the blankets so he can’t see me,” I said, proud of my solution. It never occurred to me that this man, my future husband, might want to see me, that at some point in my life I would want him to see me too. “Then, hopefully, while we sleep I’ll get pregnant.” My parents laughed.

For days after our conversation I tried to imagine the scene I had described. I pictured a young woman in a blue night gown, like Wendy from the Disney version of *Peter Pan*. Her body was flat and undeveloped, like mine, but she seemed older than me in some untraceable way. I couldn’t imagine breasts because I didn’t really know what they were supposed to look like. When I tried to imagine that woman in a bed with a man, both naked, I couldn’t. I didn’t know what a naked man was supposed to look like. I didn’t even own a Ken doll for comparison. When I eventually did get such a doll, about a year later, I immediately stripped him of his pants to see what he looked like down there, to see what was different. He didn’t look so very different from Barbie. What I did know was that these two people, the ones I imagined, would sleep on opposite sides of the bed, not even looking at each other and while they slept something magical would happen. A baby would miraculously be made, because that’s what married people do.

It was a woman’s duty.

What is a woman? The opposite of a man. Delicate, not muscular, smooth and radiant, not hairy and gruff. Curvy, voluptuous, mysterious. Not angular, flat, or mechanical. Covered in lace and frills and glittering fineries.

I have never been any of these things.

A woman is feminine, not masculine. Each of these words has a very different meaning. To be feminine in a Southern Baptist house like the one I grew up in is to accept certain types and roles. To be the cliché housewife—cook the meals, raise the kids, please the husband. To be feminine in this respect is something I can accept, though I choose to broaden its scope and not limit myself to these conditions. But even to accept these broadened terms—as if they were a negotiation—appalled women in classes I took at the university I attended for my undergraduate degree, where I minored in religious studies. Female philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* and Hazel E. Barnes in “Aside from *The Second Sex* and All That” discuss ideas of the feminine body in terms of male philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, and attempt to eradicate the idea of woman as just a woman—a definitive action, feeling, or role—and to suggest that a woman is as equally human as man, with no distinctive distinguishing features. I would accept that woman is as equally human as man, but I, personally, also accept the actions, feelings, and roles associated with woman, to an extent—the supposed feminist outlook my classmates opposed. It never occurred to me, as it did to them, that being a woman was to be unequally human, but by feminism, what I mean is not this idea that a woman should be the same as man. By feminism, I mean the features and attributes given to a woman that make her feminine. The women in that particular class were enraged at the idea that a woman should have different cultural and societal expectations than a man, a concept I couldn’t grasp, a concept I

grew up with. I imagine those women believed in ideas of feminism much like those in a game Brian, my boyfriend, once showed me on his phone.

“You have to try this game,” he said, handing me his phone. “I’m kind-of embarrassed that I like it, because it’s really extreme feminist, like far left and radical, but it’s still a pretty cool game. The graphics are good.”

I took the iPhone and he walked me through the start process. The game was based on a group of animated and highly female characters, all dressed in tight jump suits, with huge boobs and big butts, the epitome of animated perfection (like Jessica Rabbit, I suppose—these were the women I imagine those I had class with would approve: highly accentuated in the assets women love to boast, but entirely devoid of any traditional role of femininity). They were also all pilots, and all muscular, and the object of the game was to fly them around and blow up the bad guys (male characters), earning points and not dying in the process. Pretty basic, but the graphics were really good and the design was entertaining.

Brian picked out my character, set me up with a sturdy air craft, and then I took over. Fired the machine guns. Earned an extra life. Dropped a few bombs. Pow-pow-pow. Admittedly, it was a little addicting.

My phone vibrated once, during the middle of an air raid—close combat—I had been hit—needed more life. I knew it was my friend, Bethany, responding to my earlier text about our dinner date that week. But I didn’t pick up. I was busy bobbing and weaving with the simulated flight screen in front of me.

Left. Duck. Upward right.

“Your phone’s ringing,” Brian said.

“Yeah, I know,” I answered. “It’s Bethany, it can wait.”

“Hold on, I’m flying an airplane!” he said, and we both laughed.

I passed the game back to him a minute later. The pilot was complaining in the background about our combined poor flight skills. *What were you thinking? That’s not how you fly a plane!* When Brian finally made a good shot, she exclaimed, in a high pitched voice, *Eat my bomb!*

“Stupid,” Brian muttered as he tilted the phone to steer the craft toward the next target.

We were both leaning as he turned, heads nodding with the game.

“She is,” I agreed. “Girls are obnoxious.” He busted out laughing. “What?” I asked.

“Just you,” he answered. “Girls are obnoxious,” he said in a nasally imitation of me.

I am the opposite of a man. I am feminine in my ways. I am a woman.

Anatomy and the way the male and female bodies join together remained a foreign concept to me. When I was twelve, I combined my imaginative efforts with Stephanie’s to devise a language for sexual body parts that we could talk about, things we could decisively name. We had begun to acknowledge that there was a difference between a man and a woman, but our understanding of that difference was limited. We spoke in giggles and whispers on the pull out trundle bed in our shared bedroom at the end of the hall, as far from my parent’s room as we could be in the house.

“What’s a girl’s top called?” I asked.

“Tomatoes,” Stephanie replied.

“Ew,” I said. I hated tomatoes. “Why tomatoes?”

“Because they’re squishy,” she said.

“Okay, what about *down there*?”

“That’s a taco.” I never ate a taco the same way.

“What about a guy’s top?” I twisted in the sheets around me, pulling them up to my face as if I could hide my embarrassment more in the already dark room.

“I don’t know,” Stephanie said. She thought for a minute, “but his thing is a pickle.”

Thing was a word we could articulate, though not without laughter. We had no words to describe a woman’s breasts, except for chest. We did not speak of a vagina. It was simply that thing *down there*. Our own bodies, and we couldn’t even name them. We laughed at our terminology. We could talk about tomatoes and tacos and pickles because they provided images of things that we were comfortable with.

I didn’t start to think of these things as what they actually were until Stephanie started to change. Because we were both girls and both close in age (only a year-and-a-half apart), we often showered together. We shampooed our hair, rinsed, and conditioned it. We washed our flat bodies with the brightly colored bath sponges our mother bought. These things did not take much time. They were routine, the structured order of cleanliness. But when we were done, we had fun in the shower. If we washed well enough fast enough, we were allowed a few minutes each night for play.

This meant that we scooped as large a handful of soap as our hands could hold from the green Lion King body gel that our mother bought for us (green with a picture on the outside of the container of Timon and Pumba eating bugs) and smeared the faux bug guts up our arms into

a lather, gave each other a naked hug, and pulled away slowly, careful not to separate our arms, forming a giant bubble between our bodies.

I don't know when she started to change. It could not have happened between showers, from one day to the next, or during our bubble routine. But one day I looked down at our bubble and noticed, through its transparency, a spot of black. When I looked closer, I realized that this patch of black was attached to my sister, and I was horrified and curious at the same time. I said nothing to her for the duration of our shower, trying only to catch a glimpse of this marvelous horror when she wasn't watching. I was not very discreet.

"Girls," my mother called to us from behind the closed door, "it's time to get out." We rinsed the soapy residue from our smooth bodies and turned off the water. As we dried ourselves off, I worked up the courage to say something about Stephanie's new development.

"Why do you have a hairy crotch?" It was a simple question, not particularly intended to be hurtful. She covered herself with her towel and refused to answer me, but I wouldn't let it go. "You have a hairy crotch," I said, this time a statement instead of a question.

"Stop it," she said. It was clear that she didn't find this development as fascinating and open to discussion as I did. She never told me why she suddenly grew hair in a place that I thought was always to be hairless. Maybe she didn't know. My mother told me later that it was part of becoming a woman, something that happens to all girls. I didn't think her strange for this development. I was genuinely curious. What was this thing that my sister had that I did not, and why must it be protected? I jealous of her advancement toward being a woman.

That was the last time we showered together.

Aristotle suggested that the female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities. My sister didn't appear to be lacking anything. Quite the opposite. She had developed something new. What is it, then, that women lack? What, aside from physical difference, is the fundamental difference between man and woman? What do *I* lack? Why is a woman an objectified being? As a woman, do I accept this objectification? Do I objectify myself?

I do not identify myself as the form of feminist I met in my undergrad. On the contrary, those feminists would dislike me because I choose to accept some of the cultural tropes placed upon me. I will one day be a housewife. As such, I will cook meals for my husband and clean my house. I will wash dishes and go grocery shopping, wash his dirty work clothes and fold them neatly and tuck them into a dresser drawer with fabric fresheners to keep them smelling clean. I will iron his clothes, buy new pants, shirts, and ties for him. I will not do these things because they are what someone expects of me. I will do these things because they are what I expect of myself. I want to cook for my husband. I want to nourish him, nurture him, give him a part of me that I don't offer to anyone else. To supply him with amenities that ease his life when he gets home from a job that he faithfully goes to in order that he can sustain our life together. I simply want to reciprocate that care, that sustenance.

I embrace these ideas. I grew up in a Christian family that went to church three times a week. I am familiar with what the Bible says a woman is. *Ephesians 5:22-23—Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.* I know these ideas, and I accept them. They are instilled in me. They make me a woman. But the domestic implications I exonerate are not one

sided. *1 Corinthians 7— The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife.* In this way, we are equal.

This is how I see myself as a woman. Not as a domesticated slave, but as half of an equation, the other half of which I cannot be a woman without. And this service I do not mind. I find it fulfilling. And I wonder how some women can find it restricting, even in marriage, to the extent that they reject their privileges as a woman.

The girls had just made dinner. Well, *I* had just made dinner, while the other girls watched, ate some cheese and pepperonis, and the guys sat in the living room talking about motors, school, working out, and keeping an eye on the two one-year-old children running carelessly around the house.

“Dinner,” I called out to them from the kitchen. They strolled through the kitchen door in classic cave-man fashion—sloppy posture, flying language, sniffing out the food.

“Smells delicious,” Owens said. He took the pepperoni calzone I placed on a plate for him and took a bite. “Oh-my-god, this is great. Thanks, Lacey.” He sat down with his wife and child, who already had their dinner on the table.

“Welcome,” I said and smiled as I readied the next plate for Goodin.

Goodin took his serving too and sat at the table. He took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. I waited to see if my cooking was up to par. “This is great,” he said. “This is really great. I haven’t

had a good calzone in ages.” He shoved another bite down and turned to his fiancée, Jordan.

“Jordan, you need to learn how to make these.”

“Make them yourself,” Jordan said. “See what I have to put up with?” she asked as she hand fed a bite to her son in her lap. Everyone laughed.

I handed Brian a plate with the last calzone on it, grabbed my own plate, and turned to the table.

“Thanks for dinner,” Brian said. He pulled me in to him before I sat down and gave me a gentle kiss on the lips. “It looks great.” As I sat down, I noticed that Jordan was looking in our direction.

As we all sat and ate, Goodin pulled out his phone with a picture pulled up, and passed it around. The guys were cracking up, cheese and marinara sauce falling out of their mouths.

“Isn’t it hilarious?” Goodin asked.

When the picture got to his fiancé, she wasn’t as entertained. She made a face, pulled her drooling-sauce-covered-son back onto her lap, and passed the phone on to Owens’ wife, Sarah, and me.

“That’s not even funny!” Sarah said.

It was a picture of a blonde bombshell wearing a black t-shirt with bold white letters spelling W.I.F.E. vertically down the front. Following each letter was a phrase:

W-ashing

I-roning

F-ucking

E-tc

“Tell them it isn’t funny,” Sarah said, looking at me. I smiled, because all I really wanted to do was laugh.

I was thirteen when I got my first period. As if it were a gift, a bestowing of some privilege or treasure. I sat on the toilet to pee, and when I wiped the toilet paper was covered in red. There were no warning signs the first time, no cramps or bloating, no swollen feet. It just happened. I had been warned that *when* it happened was unpredictable—some girls started as early as eleven or twelve, others didn’t get one until they were fifteen—and that it was nothing unusual. Every woman had one once a month. When I saw the blood I thought that it must be my period, but I wasn’t sure.

“Momma,” I said in the kitchen after I had finished in the bathroom, “I think I started my period.” There was no extravagant reaction, no celebration, pity, or other form of emotion. She was cutting up lettuce for a salad for dinner.

“What makes you think that?” she asked, slicing and dicing the leaves into bites.

I told her about the blood.

“Okay,” she said and put down the knife. She disappeared into her bedroom and returned a minute later holding a white plastic package with pink and blue letters on it. “Here,” she said, handing me the package. There was no instruction on how to use the thing in the plastic. She had handed me a bag of pads, not tampons. (Tampons, she later told me, were unnatural and unsanitary and could possibly lead to infertility. She advised me not to use them, and the first time I did, in a crisis situation during high school, I had no idea how to use one, I was so unfamiliar with my own body.) I retreated to the bathroom with my box of feminine products,

the Band-Aid for this occurrence, and looked at the pictures on the side of the bag. They were not helpful. Drawing my own conclusions, I removed a single pad from its packaging, peeled off the adhesive strip, and stuck it to my underwear. It hung over the edges of my panties and stuck to the crotch of my jeans when I pulled my pants up. As I took my first step I could feel and hear the pad crunching. It was bulky and awkward, and I just knew that I had used it incorrectly.

“Momma,” I said again, emerging cautiously from the bathroom, trying not to crunch as I walked. “Did I do this right?”

She asked me how I had used the pad as she rinsed the already cut lettuce in a strainer at the sink. I told her my procedure, and how uncomfortable it felt. It couldn’t be right, I explained, because it felt so weird.

“You did it right,” she confirmed, to my dismay. “It takes some getting used to, but you’ll figure it out.”

“How do I know when to change it?” I asked.

“You’ll just know,” she said. And that was that.

Later that night, as I was sitting on the front room floor with my two younger sisters watching a movie, I reached across Rebecca, the younger of the two, to get popcorn from the bowl on Christin’s lap. My pad made the crunching noise it had made in the bathroom earlier and I winced.

“What was that?” Rebecca asked.

“What?” I replied in an effort to evade her question. I didn’t want either of them to know about this thing that had happened to my body, this mark of womanhood.

“It sounded like you had a leaf in your pants,” she laughed.

“A dried and crunchy maple leaf,” Christin added with a smile.

“It was nothing,” I said. I shifted my weight carefully as I sat back in my seat on the floor.

“Do it again,” Rebecca said.

“No.”

I didn’t want this part of womanhood. It was embarrassing and awkward, and I did not feel the beauty I saw in Stephanie as she grew. I don’t know what exactly I expected to see in myself, what beauty was, but it wasn’t there.

What makes a woman beautiful? There is inner beauty, an attraction of the soul, and physical beauty, an attraction of the body. Who decided that physical beauty is based on symmetry of features? What kind of genetics must I possess for men to interpret my physique as fertile and womanly?

When I was six years old, my mom painted my nails so that I would look beautiful for my grandparents when they arrived. I liked it when she painted my nails, until she made me sit still after she was finished for them to dry.

“Am I done yet?” I asked, bouncing up and down on the hand-me-down brown and yellow tweed couch in our living room.

“A few more minutes,” she said as she dabbed pink nail polish on my younger sister’s tiny nails. “Blow on them, it will help.”

I did. I blew and spit and bathed my own small hands in as much air as my lungs could extract. Less than five minutes later, I asked again.

“Now am I done?”

“One more minute,” she said, dotting my sister’s last finger.

“But I’m tired of sitting here,” I complained. “I want to go play outside.”

“It takes time to be beautiful,” she said. “You can play outside in a minute when your nails are dry.”

“I don’t want to be beautiful,” I said. I crossed my arms and sunk back into the itchy fabric of the couch.

There’s a picture in my house that serves as evidence of my lack of feminine qualities as a child. In it, I wear an ocean green dress with small puff sleeves at the shoulders. The skirt poofs out like a long tutu. Around the neck is a lace collar trimmed with all the frills a little girl could want. These same frills extend over the rest of the dress, topped with a white silk ribbon around the waist. In the picture my face is red—a tomato compared to my white blond hair—my mouth is wide in an O-shape, revealing little white teeth, and my eyes are pressed closed by the water flooding my face. I was three years old.

I still don’t like frills and lace, but at age twenty, in an effort towards the feminine, I began my own workout regimen. This would improve my physique, give me a more shapely figure, less pudge. To keep myself accountable, I began conversations with myself about my daily routine.

“I had a healthy breakfast, and I’ve only had 100 calories in snacks since I’ve been at work today. Can I eat this piece of chocolate?” *That piece of chocolate alone is 100 calories. Yes, you ran this morning, and yes, you had a healthy breakfast. But you don’t need 100 extra fat calories.* “So I can’t have it?” *It’s your body. Do what you want. Just don’t blame me.* “I won’t.”

I began to chide myself, motivate myself—like a bad coach.

I swore at myself. *Get your lazy ass out of bed and go for your run.* “But it’s 7AM. Can’t I sleep a little longer?” *You can, if you want to be fat. Now MOVE!*

So I did. I dragged myself like a caveman from my bed and donned my running clothes. Run. Run. Run. Don’t eat this and don’t eat that. It became a perpetual cycle.

I became my own worst critic. I treated myself poorly.

“Why won’t this extra fluff go away?” I grabbed the skin around the waist of my pants and shook it. “I work out.” *Pfff. Yeah, you work out your digestive tract.* I never saw myself as pretty.

I became highly emotional. I screamed at people from inside the safety of my own car.

“Drive you idiot! Get off the road! At least go the speed limit! Why are you so old? Crazy woman driver!” *You are a crazy woman driver, you self-righteous hypocrite.*

Sometimes I tried to console myself when I was hopelessly depressed about love.

“I’m right, right? I have a valid point—he shouldn’t have waited so long to call—he knew I was expecting him.” *Yes, yes he did. You make a valid point, you do. He shouldn’t have waited so long to call.* “Then why do I feel so bad for being upset at him? He was wrong, right?” *Yes of course. It is that time of the month, after all.* “I will not use that as an excuse. Don’t even try to tell me that that is the only reason I’m right. I have feelings too, dammit.” *Of course you do, dammit. That’s why you’re so mad you’re crying.*

Sometimes I just randomly interjected into my own thoughts, for fun.

Take a bite out of life. “Shut up. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” *Why did the chicken cross the road?* “Because I ran past it on my jog this morning, and it panicked.” *Now ask me a question.* “Why don’t you ever leave me alone?”

This effort towards beauty was the result of awkward growth, of being unhappy with myself as a woman. It didn’t start suddenly. It was a growing dissatisfaction, one that started early in my childhood.

After we stopped showering together, I monitored Stephanie’s growth over the next year. She started wearing things called bras, and this required special shopping trips to Walmart. I hated these trips. There was nothing for me to do. Stephanie got to try on all the bras while I walked up and down aisles of A, B, C, and D cups of varying foaminess, wondering who wore such devices and why. Even though I didn’t understand the functionality of a bra, I understood that it represented some rite of passage into being a woman, and I wanted one too.

“I think I need a bra,” I said to my mother, indicating one of the bras she held for Stephanie to try on. It was a soft grey fabric with a little purple flower between the cups.

“Not yet,” she said, taking the bra from my hands. “You haven’t started developing yet.” I knew nothing of this development. I had nothing for a bra to hold, but I wanted one anyway. I wanted to be inducted into this secret society of women.

I didn’t get a bra for another year, and when I did I hated it. It was itchy, and tight, and a hand-me-down from Stephanie. My own breasts were nothing compared to hers—she had turned into a woman overnight, it seemed. When we changed into swimsuits to go play in the pool I tried desperately to sneak a glimpse of her new breasts. They were full and strange to behold.

They had a weight that mine lacked, a round perfection where mine were just points. I wanted to possess this feminine byproduct, this bodily part that seemed to make a woman of a girl. I wanted, at that moment, to be feminine. Too young to think about the implications that would accompany womanhood, I urged myself to change, to adapt, to grow. I went into the bathroom before we headed out to the pool and pulled down my one-piece suit to observe myself in the mirror.

What I saw was a girl, flat, white, and plain.

There was nothing to behold.

THE LOVE NARRATIVE

My little children, these things I write to you.

1 John 2:1

I loved to search—in vain, for Booboo and Where-You-At, Aunt Millie’s two tan Chihuahuas that played hide and seek all day long. I loved to romp—around the boundless expanse of property. Loved to run—from Keith, my aunt’s son. Loved the dilapidated white house that belonged to my grandpa—peeled paint on every board, squeaky porch and rocking chairs, a picture straight out of the good old South. Fresh country air—a tent for a garage, under which the car was always parked, next to the wild grape vines and weeds. When I was five, visiting my grandpa and my aunt in Tallahassee was something I loved.

I never liked walking out to visit the huntin’ dogs, as Keith called them, where the brown, black, and white spattered coonhounds sat in their own excrement and ate pebbles of things Keith swore were dog food. I gagged and cried for the dogs, and asked my mom why nobody loved them, why they couldn’t be free, like Booboo and Where-You-At.

“Because they’re not pets, they’re working dogs,” she said. When I walked her out there to show her how sad they were, she held her nose and walked back to the house. “They smell awful.” We clearly didn’t look at them the same way.

Grandpa favored taking me fishing. He found it amusing that I so willingly crawled around in the dirt and mud on my hands and knees, pulling long stringy worms from the soft earth, while I refused to touch a cricket. Something about their legs, the crickets, but I never mentioned that to anybody. It would make me look squeamish, girly, and I didn’t want that. My

hands just kept pulling worm after worm out of its hole, where it surfaced after a long rain and fatefully became bait.

“Don’t pull too hard, you’ll break it,” Grandpa’s raspy old voice warned. Too late. With a small thud, the half-worm that I did get fell into the plastic bucket with all the others, and my face tilted up from my squatting position at his wrinkled old face, watery red eyes. I wondered why all he ever wore was a yellow stained t-shirt and denim overalls. He fit in out there, in the woods.

With every visit my eyes lit up at the prospect of playing outside, barefoot and blissful, to fish, dig up worms, play with dogs, pick less-than-ripened wild grapes, and sometimes go on boat rides.

But time is like a predator—never see it coming, and then—snap. It takes away what you love.

Things faded. My grandpa died. The trips stopped. Ideas changed. I started wanting to be a woman. People transformed. My mother and I became two distinctly different people, further apart than we were on his property. But like a good plotline, I looked for an overarching theme. A connection in our story. Something to hold on to.

When I have kids, I want boys. Not girls. I come from a family of four daughters, including myself. Plus my mom, that makes five PMS-ing girls a month that my father had to deal with. Like wrestling gators. Wild things. All teeth and claws.

Brian and I fully embrace the fact that after three happy years of dating, no in-each-others-face arguments, there’s a chance we’ll end up married, and with marriage, we’ll

eventually have children together. It's not set in stone, and he's very careful not to give me any opportunity to think that he's planning our engagement.

"Don't get excited because I'm on my knees," he says, "I'm just tying my shoe." Or "I have a surprise for you. Don't worry, we're not getting married."

With a slam, the car door of the purring white Mazda Protégé 5 closes behind me. Brian is in the driver's seat. We're on our way to visit his godson. It's been a long day with my mom—too many hormones in the house—and as I arrange my black flower print purse amidst the clutter of empty water and Gatorade bottles on the floorboard, announce that when I have kids, I want boys. They're easier.

"Me too," Brian agrees. We've had this talk before—we both prefer boys. He wants someone he can take out to the garage with him, age non-essential, and teach mechanics and cars to. Forget the sports. That will be fun too, but it's the engines he's worried about. He wants his own version of the overall-clad-button-nosed-boy sitting on the dusty garage floor with a rubber mallet in his mouth, while Dad works on a 70's Mustang—Brian as a baby, my favorite picture of him. I just don't want to deal with all the petty squabbles, girl-on-girl crime, raging hormones, bras, and panties. It gets crazy sometimes. "Two would be enough—it's the responsible thing to do."

"How so?" I ask, popping a piece of peppermint gum into my mouth as the car glides to the front of the neighborhood. I pull my army green five dollar jacket sleeves down my hands, shivering slightly in the sixty-five degree weather. Coming from a family of six, two kids never appealed to me. It's too small a number. I don't want four either though. Too large, too

mathematically even. Divisible. Maybe I just don't like even numbers. Maybe I associate these numbers with being female.

"One to replace me, one to replace you," he says. He laughs at me for shivering, but he reaches over and puts one warm hand in mine after shifting gears onto US1. He fits this car—black and white baseball cap with Mr. Horsepower's raging cigar-stocked face, black t-shirt with Frankenstein's monster etched into the design, logo reading, "I dig flatheads," and bullhead jeans. An eclectic look of off-brands, scavenged goods, like his salvaged and rebuilt car.

"Well that's no fun," I say. "I don't like the number two." I pout. This is what we do. We don't argue about who's right or wrong. We don't yell and scream at each other for different opinions. We acknowledge our differences and make light of them. It's how we've been for the three years we've been together, and though I don't yet know it, it's how we'll continue to be a few years later as we plan our wedding. We just kind-of fit.

"How many do you want?" he asks. I don't know if he's sure he wants the answer. His eyes dart back and forth between the road and me, awaiting my answer.

"Three," I say after a moment. I won't realize for at least three years why I might have picked this number. It's a nice prime number. Added with two (the parents), it's still a prime number. Not divisible. A full house. Yahtzee.

"Three?" His face pushes forward, almost like it hurts to get the word out, like he really has to process it.

"It's a nice number. I think three little boys running around in the mud and dirt would be fun." A small pause. "I also think it would be fun to have twins." His eyes are only on the road now. "They run in my family." Like a slow-motion Felix clock, he glances my direction. His

mouth a contorted half-smile, like I might be joking. This is something I've hesitated to tell him before, avoiding the mention of it in our past conversations about kids. "The gene skipped a generation. My dad's siblings haven't had any yet, but my aunt hasn't had any kids."

"Well, maybe she's got the gene," he jokes, still a little nervous sounding. I don't tell him that the idea of my aunt hoarding this gene, wasting it, horrifies me. This possibility means that my dream isn't likely to ever come true.

"Not like it's up to me anyway," I say. I let his concern roll into oblivion, as if it isn't real, as if my desire is just a whim, not important to me. I didn't expect a different reaction, really. "Guess we'll just have to wait and see."

This waiting was not a luxury my parents experienced. My mother found out within a year of marriage that if she wanted to have kids, she'd better start now. Brian's parents waited a couple of years after they were married, till they were thirty. They had one boy and one girl. Did my parents want to wait too? I know they wanted children, because they wasted no time—three daughters, a year-and-a-half apart each. I know they wanted boys, because after three girls, they were willing to try one more time for that elusive son. They got a fourth daughter. Did they want four kids? Four girls? What must it have felt like to try, and try, and try, and try again, with the same result each time? Brian and I have plans. What kind of plans did my parents have? Morality would suggest that the aim of love is marriage, and, consequently, children. What is a child, though, but a third party, an object placed between lovers? What if the presence of children threatens the romantic relationship of the parents? What if it reduces the exhaustingly passionate love with an ethical project?

A child. Detrimental. The barrier between lovers.

With four daughters, my mother took on the role not just of parent, but of teacher. My parents felt that the public school system wasn't safe for a Christian child to grow up in, so my mom home schooled us. There were perks. I could work at my own pace—some days I started school at 9:00 AM and finished by 11:00 AM. In seventh grade I could do most of my work by myself. But other days it could take from 9:00 AM till 6 or 7:00 PM, long after Daddy got home from work, after dinner, after daylight hours, two hours before bedtime. Those were the bad days. On those days I wasn't smart enough. Didn't understand conjunctions. Didn't understand fractions. Just didn't understand.

“You need to pay attention,” my mother said loudly, forcefully, hair pulled back in a tight pony-tail, the same look every day, the cliché housewife. Long denim shorts, white tennis shoes because the tile floor hurt her feet, and a loose fitting t-shirt top. “You're not stupid, so stop acting like it.”

Our classroom was one large room with three desks, all in separate corners to keep us from distracting each other. On pretty days we did school on the back porch.

There was a Tike's house in the school room, one of those white houses that looked like it had plastic siding, a green shingled roof, and a red or yellow half-door, a window on the left and right side walls. It was in a corner, and she got so mad that she flipped it, thrashing—a predator and its prey.

“I'm tired of you girls always making me look like a monster,” she said. “Maybe I should just put you all in public school and be done.” Me and my two other sisters stood in the doorway, crying.

Were we too much effort, objects placed between her and her romantic passions? Were we an ethical project that she couldn't teach? She was not abusive, not a physically aggressive mother. What did we do that made her so angry?

She never hit me. She only hit my older sister, Stephanie, twice—slapped her once in the mouth, when Steph was in high school, for mouthing off. Soap in the mouth had long ago stopped being effective. The other time was years later, after high school. Steph came home drunk one night, swearing up and down that she was not, even though she couldn't stand straight. Steph pushed my dad, and my mom hit her. Later, when I spoke with my mother about this incident, she said she did it because she was defending my dad, because he wouldn't do anything to make Steph stop pushing him.

That morning, the morning Steph came home drunk at 3:00 AM, right after my mom hit her, Steph texted me from across the hall to ask if I was awake. I heard everything that happened, and I didn't really want to get involved. I walked across to her room anyway.

Pitch-black—lights off—clothes, shoes, purses, money, everything on the floor. “She hit me,” she blubbered through blackened mascara eyes. “I'm not drunk.” She sat on her knees and tottered back and forth, burping. “I don't even want to be here right now.” Alive, in this house—she meant them, one and the same.

“She didn't mean it,” I said. I hugged her closely, smelled her, cried, and laughed at her burps. Her drinking was at its worst. She told me that a friend from work was coming to pick her up. Reminded me that she didn't want to be here, that she felt like she had no reason to live because nobody here loved her, except me and my younger sisters. “Don't do anything stupid,” I

said as she stumbled around her room gathering what she needed the next day for work. She promised she wouldn't.

Moments later, at the front door, she hugged me tight, unsteady, and said she loved me. Then she was gone. I closed and locked the door behind her, slid down to the floor, a pounding headache, red face, no more water in my eyes—not breathing. 3:15 AM.

My mother said Daddy wouldn't even raise an arm in self-defense. He just took it. From his daughter. From his ethical project. What was my dad like before he had a family? I have known him only in the context of five women, myself included. Did we change him, make him someone my mother didn't know?

Shortly after Brian and I started dating my mom started finding time to talk to me—about sex, about love, about how important God is and should be in my life—about how I needed to make sure that Brian was someone I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. For one of these conversations, we sat in her bedroom on the queen-sized bed clad in a southern style crimson comforter. I dangled my leg off the edge of the bed and ran my fingers along the meandering thread lines that adorned the bedspread. My toes touched the cold tile floor that looked like wood, minus all the scratches. The French doors that overlooked the back porch were inviting—it was warm outside.

“It's so easy to fall in love,” she told me. Brian and I had only been dating a couple of months. “He doesn't come to church,” she said, and that was important to her. It meant he wasn't very Christian. “You want a strong leader, someone who will read the Bible with you, lead your family in study.” We used to do that, fifteen years or so ago. Got up before daybreak, before my dad went to work and had Bible study together. I hated these regimens. Wanted nothing but to go

back to sleep. I was five years old. Maybe six. I never remembered anything from these studies. “I wish your dad was a stronger leader.” I had never heard her put my dad down before. I sat and twirled my hair, highlighted by the summer sun. My tanned feet and pink toes still touched the floor, dangled into another world, another conversation, away from this one that I didn’t want to hear.

“I love your dad,” she said, “but I’m not in love with him anymore.”

In Brian’s car I tell him I will not fall out of love. It’s a promise both to him and to myself.

I grew up with the knowledge that good parenting involved team work between husband and wife. My Southern Baptist background taught me that women had certain roles in the house, different than the man, no less important. The wife stayed home, raised the kids, cooked the meals, etc. The husband earned the income, balanced the budget, provided for his family. He was a leader, she was a follower, submissive, but not unheard, a role that I want desperately to play.

I don’t like absolutes, mandatory nonnegotiable social expectations, but when, in several years, Brian and I are engaged, there are certain things I will want to do for him as a wife. I want him to come home from work and not have to worry about cooking a gourmet meal. To come home and relax, tell me about his work, because I care and want to be involved in his life. I’m excited about being a wife.

I was raised in a home with a mom who was a wife for about eighteen of my twenty-three years. She cooked daily, washed dishes daily, did the grocery shopping monthly, for six people. She taught school to four girls, daily. She was a mom, a teacher, and a wife, daily. Daily, she was an incredible woman. But somewhere along the way, something broke. She got tired. Jealous

maybe, that my dad didn't have to stay home with us every day. That he got to go out and see other people, have a professional job. Maybe her ethical projects exhausted her, took too much out of her for life and love to replace. I can't really know. But she changed. She stopped cooking, split that responsibility with my dad. I started washing all the dishes, breakfast and dinner, and my dad washed whatever got dirtied in between. Grocery shopping became an every-six-weeks-or-so event, often accompanied by my dad, the time in-between trips labeled a fend-for-yourself period. We all grew up, my sisters and I, and entered the public high school and college scene. And she, with no more ethical projects, forgot how to love.

I tell Brian about this later, about my mother's lost love. This is when I tell him I will not fall out of love. I tell only Brian. I can't tell anyone else. Can't risk my dad knowing. He'd do anything, does everything to make my mother happy.

And she can't even stay in love with him.

Before he died, my Grandpa took my family—my mother, my dad, my sisters, and me—on a boat ride one cloudy afternoon with some of the worms I'd found and a couple of fishing rods. We normally fished from the shore, but today he wanted to fish from the water. My mother kept freaking out about something, so I inherently panicked too. She whispered to Daddy, pointing, but all my peering brown eyes saw across the dark glassy surface were empty ripples.

"They are capable of tipping over a boat, Chas," I heard my mother hiss at Daddy. He muttered back that we'll be fine. "I don't want my daughters out here with those things swimming around." They're everywhere, not just here, Daddy rationalized. But he would ask my grandpa to take us back to the boat dock if she wanted. She did.

My parents were talking about gators. Not just one, or even two. The inlet where we were fishing was crawling with scales and teeth. They had been brushing against the boat, but minding their own business. By the time I figured out what was happening we were almost back to the dock. Sweaty and hot, I realized I was nervous too. My mother always spoke of articles in the paper or stories on the news about children being gobbled down or shredded by the giant lizards, and I imagined myself the perfect victim for their next meal.

At the dock my grandpa stepped out of the boat, followed by Daddy. He said something quietly to my mother, who replied in worried tones. Being distracted by my fear of the gators, all I heard was white noise, chatter. My mother pointed. Between the boat and dock. Down. The boat and the dock. Don't you dare lift the kids over that. Boat and dock. Golden eyes. A gator.

But I was lifted over *that*, then, and now, floating over time, over separation, over loss.

The love that was once there, love of life, love of a person, of passion, means nothing. It is subject to fall apart.

The story crumbles. I dissolve, as a character. As a future mother. As a daughter.

What if there is no overarching theme? No connecting story to bridge us together. In the end, it's just a soul-searching void, a cavity—the mouth of a predator.

EXODUS

O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?

1 Corinthians 15: 55

When I was eleven I found a dead possum.

Some hot Florida day, along the deserted old railroad track that used to run behind my neighborhood, I found the fascinating corpse of a dead critter, a possum. It was a rare artifact to me. It was not road kill. It looked as if it had just crawled across the track, perhaps in search of food, or water, and died. Most of the tissue had decomposed already, leaving the skeleton behind. It didn't smell. In fact, there was a distinct lack of odor, the lingering absence of a body long decayed, all fleshy presence gone. There were a few flies. The lack of odor did not, however, deter me from inhaling through the protection of my carefully constructed t-shirt mask—I pulled the neck of my shirt over my mouth and nose as a shield against germs. It struck me as odd that this creature was lying in the middle of an abandoned railroad track, seemingly perfectly intact, except, of course, that it was dead. I ogled over the specimen for a short while, and felt an explorer's urge to attain any object I could from the site—proof of my adventure.

Leaning over the corpse, I perused its remains. I waved aside the hovering buzz of insects. Before me lay the creature in its entirety, lacking only its life. The feet were too ill preserved and difficult to extract. The skeletal body far too much—I wanted only a token, not the entire artifact. My brown eyes probed the soulless face of the object of my fascination, and at last I found my relic. With the precision of a professional, cloth mask still over my sweat drenched face, I plucked a single tooth, a molar, from the jaw of the fleshless face and pocketed my prize.

When I was fourteen, I got the brainy idea that it would be awesome to breed my female rabbit with my male rabbit. Little baby bunnies. When I asked my mom, she said no. She said I didn't know what I was getting myself into, and I didn't know what all it would involve. I did my research. I went to the library and checked out as many books as I was allowed on rabbits and how to care for them. At home, I read through each of these books carefully, and then passed them on to my mom so that she could read them too—this much she agreed to, to research the idea. When we were both done, I asked again.

“Please,” I said. “I don't want to keep them. Well maybe one. But we can find homes for the rest.”

She considered for a moment before she finally said yes. We could give it a try. “But don't get your expectations up too high,” she said. “Fluffy is old, and Joy is much younger than he is, and it may not work.” Fluffy was our orange and white male rabbit. We'd had him since we moved to this house in 1999, five years ago. He would be Joy's husband, the buck. Joy was brown and white spotted, soft as velvet. She was a gift from some family friends, the doe.

When I put Fluffy and Joy together in a cage, they knew exactly what to do. I watched as Fluffy humped Joy for a minute, and then got off. I pulled her out of his cage and placed her back in her own.

We watched Joy for about two weeks after the breeding session to see what she did. She began pulling her fur out and lining the box we had placed in her cage. She was nesting.

“It worked,” I said. “She's going to have babies.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” my mom said. “It could be a false alarm.” We had read about this in our books too, that rabbits can think they are pregnant, even if humped by another female. Their body will go into false pregnancy, and they will act as if they will have babies.

The next week we planned a family vacation, a camping trip. We estimated that Joy’s babies weren’t due until a week or so after our return. Because rabbits only need food and water, we did not hire a pet sitter. Instead, we filled up their food and water dispensers with extra supplies and left.

When we returned, a few days later, my mom discovered that we had grossly overestimated Joy’s gestation period, and the babies had been born while we were away.

“It’s not very pretty,” she said to me the day we got home. “Are you sure you want to see it?”

I did. For whatever reason, I was more curious about this thing called death that had happened in our backyard than I was sad, so I walked the distance from the house to the rabbit hutch by myself in silence. When I got there, what I saw surprised me. I wasn’t afraid, just surprised by the grotesqueness. Joy died giving birth. There were two or three swollen bald baby bunny bodies scattered around the hutch. One tiny bunny head stuck out from beneath Joy’s tail, having never made it out. It was surrounded by rabbit feces. Joy herself looked as if she were sleeping. Fat. Bloated. Stiff. Not breathing.

One of the bodies was torn, half in the cage and half gone. Its leg had been pulled through the bottom wire by a predator, presumably a raccoon. There was dried fur stuck to its remains, Joy’s fur.

I didn't go to the hospital because of my ovaries. I went because after a week in Chicago eating nothing but greasy restaurant food (in place of the eggs, bananas, apples, salads, and turkey sandwiches I usually ate), and sweet tea and Jameson on the rocks (in place of a gallon of water daily), plus no workout routine, I had a urinary tract infection. But because of the severe pain I experienced in my right kidney, the doctor ordered a CAT scan to check for kidney stones. She was supposed to tell me that there were no stones, the antibiotics would clear up the infection, and I would be fine. But when she walked through the curtain door, she said, "You have a small cyst on your left ovary."

No kidney stones—*that* pain was purely from the infection.

But there was a cyst.

"It's a functional cyst," she said. "Nothing major. They're quite common in women, actually."

Functional cysts grow on the ovaries during menstruation. They are either follicle cysts or corpus luteum cysts—neither, usually, cancerous. Depending on the type, they can last anywhere from a few weeks to three months. Both result from a malfunction of the sac—it doesn't properly dissolve or release the egg in ovulation. They cause no damage to the ovary, but they can be uncomfortable. Mine are accompanied by cramps not too different from those that come with my period. Everything surrounding my ovaries gets tight, stretched feeling, full of pressure. Sometimes, when I'm sitting, I get a pain so acute that I have to lift myself in my chair to take the pressure off the already tense space between my legs. It shoots from the surface of my skin to the deeper muscles and tissue that compose my womanhood, like something ripping through

me—a pain I imagine in conjunction with childbirth. It lasts no more than ten seconds, usually, but sometimes pulses repeatedly.

Depending on the time of the month, there's a small lump at the top of my V, the skin area just above my ovaries. On occasion, when I am particularly hurting, Brian puts his hands there, warm and calming, and presses the weight of a single finger down on the little planet, the moon that orbits me monthly.

“Here?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say. I can feel the tiny mass move under his touch.

“I can feel it.”

In the office, my mother exhaled deeply when the doctor said what kind of cyst it was. “I had those at about her age, and the doctors didn't think I'd ever have kids,” she said. Hers were a different kind of cyst.

When she was twenty-two, my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cysts. Doctors told her if she wanted children she needed to have them as soon as possible, and there was still no guarantee that she would carry even one single child. She ended up with four perfectly healthy girls, all four C-sections. In the hospital room, she imposed this predicament on me.

When the doctor told me I had functional cysts, I was twenty-three, and eighteen months away from marriage. Not yet ready for children. Brian and I agreed we wanted to wait a few years before kids. At least three. He said five. If we waited five years after we were married, I would be twenty-nine before I got pregnant.

At the hospital, while the doctor spoke privately with me, my mom managed to get Brian on the subject of children.

“We’re waiting at least five years,” he said.

“You can’t do that,” my mom told him. “Lacey will be too old then. It’s not healthy for women to have children after thirty. It puts them at high risk.”

I was convinced my risks were already quite high. There was my mom, with her ovarian cysts and C-sections. There was also my younger sister, Christin. Several years ago Christin was diagnosed as having a bicornuate uterus. She wasn’t told she couldn’t have kids. She could. Possibly. But both she and her children would be at a high risk. Her chances of miscarriage greater than normal, because of the shape of her uterus. My CAT-scan didn’t reveal a misshapen uterus. I had no reason to believe anything was wrong with me. But every time I felt that pain, I wondered what was inside me, what was not quite right.

I scheduled my first visit to a gynecologist months before my wedding date. Having no idea what to expect and no desire to have this conversation with my mom, I asked Christin what her experience was like because she was married two years ago. She had been through the process.

“What happens?” I asked her in her champagne colored GMC Jimmy on our way to go thrift-store shopping. I was embarrassed that I didn’t know this answer at twenty-three years old. I could have looked it up online, but I asked her instead.

“It’s a little weird,” she said, hands on the wheel, eyes on the road. We didn’t look at each other while we talked about it. “It helps that she’s female. Having a guy do it would be plain awkward.” What I wanted to ask was what *it* meant, but she answered my question for me. “She basically says, ‘I’m going to touch you here, here, and here,’ and then she does. She’s very

professional about it, and quick. It doesn't hurt." I was glad to hear this. "Mommy tried to tell me it would be really painful, that it hurts her, so I got all freaked out, but I barely felt it."

Why would it hurt my mom? I wanted to know the answer to this question—what caused her pain? What I needed to know, precisely, was what could go wrong at *my* appointment. What might the doctor find when she checked to see if I was healthy, normal. What new pain might she unearth?

The reason for my visit was so that I could get regulated on birth control before the wedding. This scared me too—my mother's side of the family has a bad history with birth control. One of my cousins was hospitalized over it. Christin's doses were too high—they gave her headaches and she had to buy prescription glasses that she never needed before she was on birth control. Her doctor said she was developing minor migraines. I could name many people who are on birth control and have no issues with it. My concerns seemed invalid. But still, I could not help but wonder what might happen to me. What if it made me sick and I had to go to the hospital? What if it ruined my vision? Gave me headaches? What if it made me infertile? What if, in a few years and I am done with it, it is too late? What if, at twenty-nine, nature's birth control kicks in and I am too old to have children?

I wanted to know what the gynecologist would find when she searched me. Would she find more lumps and masses with mysterious origins?

When I first found the small lump that grew inside me on a monthly basis, I thought about another lump that I do not yet know, a lump that I would one day plan for. With every pain that my small lump brought, I recalled my mother's lump. With each jab, I felt my womanhood

called into question. With this lump, I felt my future children erased. If I could not bear children, I could not call myself a woman.

In the Bible, women who couldn't have children were thought to be cursed of God. Hannah, Samuel's mother, was so desperate for a child and the blessings associated with birth that she dedicated her first child to God before he was even conceived. Zechariah and Elizabeth were thought to have great sin in their lives because they were childless. Hannah got Samuel, and Elizabeth became the mother of John the Baptist. These women were women by virtue of the offspring of their womb. What will spring forth from my womb?

Two or three years into our relationship, Brian and I had a conversation, jokingly, about children.

"What if I can't have any?" I asked. I sat in the passenger seat of the white and blue Mazda Protégé 5 he's had since we started dating. I kicked off my flip-flops and put my painted red toes on the dash, rolled the window down, and sat back in my seat, ready to go.

"That," he said as he opened the sunroof, "would be grounds for break-up." It was a casual theoretical conversation long before we were serious about dating, about love, about each other.

"Exit strategy," I said. We joked about the stupid things that we might break up over because we never fought. We would see who could file away the most exit strategies, things downright comical: If I didn't shave my legs, he would break up with me. Exit strategy. If he grew a beard like Billy Gibbons, I would break up with him. Exit strategy. Preposterous scenarios. I would never stop shaving my legs, and if he let his beard get that long, I wouldn't really break up with him.

If I could not have babies, he would break up with me. Unwanted and uncontrollable exit strategy. I cannot alter this part of me. If a child refuses to grow, and I don't know that it won't, I can't open my womb and make it grow. I can't make that pain go away.

It's a joke, intended as a joke. Brian won't really leave me over this. But it isn't funny, and I shouldn't have said it. Three years later, just months before we are to be married, I will think of our game. What if my pain means something? What if that something is me not being able to have children? There will be no more exit strategy.

When I was twenty-two, I lost another pet.

I got up for work one morning and my mom told me she thought my cat, Matty, was dying. "You should probably go out and see Matty before you go," she said. "I don't think he's going to be around much longer."

"Okay," I said. This did not come as a complete shock to me. Matty was twelve years old, and had been nothing more than a skeleton for months. I ate my breakfast, got ready for work, and went outside to see him. When I opened the door, Matty did not come to greet me. I walked to the back corner of our yard where a childhood fort stood, a memorial to youth. I climbed the steps to the top of the fort and found him lying in a box, green eyes open, body stiff, a single fly crawling on his ear.

"Matty," I said, knowing he wouldn't respond. I waved the fly away. He looked normal. As normal as he had in months. Emaciated body, like a cat survivor of the holocaust. His gray fur, always mangy, looked as coarse as always. With his eyes open, he could have just been laying there, panting in the heat. Except he wasn't breathing.

I took the steps back down to ground level and returned to the house.

“Matty is dead,” I said to my mom. For a moment she didn’t say anything. I recognized the absence of emotion on my part, and thought it strange. I was sad, but didn’t know how to express that sadness. I was not overwhelmed with desperation or loss, just a sense of strangeness, a change, an unusual absence that did not belong.

“I’m sorry,” she said, finally. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I said instinctively, unsure of how I actually felt. “I have to leave for work. I can’t bury him right now.” There was no question in my mind that he would, of course, get a burial. I would not just dump his body behind the fence like a piece of trash.

“I’ll get your dad to take care of it when he gets home,” she assured me.

When I came home from work that night, I found that my dad’s idea of ‘taking care of it’ entailed placing Matty in a white trash bag in the garbage can at the end of the driveway with the rest of the week’s garbage. For some reason, I was not mad. Should I have been? I found, instead, a slight humor in my dad’s manner of dealing with this death, a complete and total opposite to mine. He saw Matty’s body as something to be disposed of, and he did what people do with trash—threw it out. I felt bad leaving Matty there all night, as if I were disrespecting his being, acknowledging him as insignificant, but it would be difficult to dig in the dark.

I rose early the next morning and retrieved his body from the end of the street before the trash men came. I couldn’t bring myself to remove the plastic bag. His body was stiff, unreal, and already his eyes had gone soft. I wasn’t sure I could stomach whatever smell might emerge with him.

I grabbed an old shovel and walked to the corner of the yard that gets the most sun, where blackberry bushes grow, and dug. The corner was quiet, drenched in morning dew. To my left was the wooden fence that divided our yard from our neighbor's, and to my right a loose mesh fence overgrown with thorns and leaves that comprise blackberry bushes—it was not the season for them to fruit. The sun beat down, still early, still hot. I wanted to sing a song, like people do in books. Hum a soul-afflicting tune. And dig. Go down. Deeper. Toss the dirt. Place the blade of the shovel on the earth—push—pull—lift—dump—repeat until the hole was dug, deep enough that a scavenger wouldn't dig his body up and drag it away.

When I was satisfied with the hole, I wrapped the body and bag in an old soft towel and placed it in the ground. It bothered me that I couldn't leave him in a natural state of decay. My consolation was that eventually the plastic would rot, and then his bones would be free, cradled in a sort of blanket, something he loved when he was alive. The ground was beautiful, cold. Cold, but inviting. *Come and cool off*, it said, *release yourself from this heat, this misery, this heartache called life, and lay down*. A welcome for the dead. I shoveled the dirt back into the hole.

A year earlier, when I was twenty-one, I went for a run one day. I noticed, just up the road, a spot of white on the side of the street. There, lying in the grass, leathery body flattened by a car—I could almost see the tire tracks impressed upon what was left of the hide—was a dead possum. I scanned the corpse carefully, purely out of curiosity, and wondered how long it had been there. There were strips of flesh, dried and rubbery clinging to the skeletal frame—the skull was perfectly intact, untouched. I thought about taking it home with me. Not the whole body, just the

skull. All the teeth were still there, the jaw unbroken, still properly hinged. The spinal cord was still attached at the back. This was the reason that I decided to leave it in its place.

As I headed off again in the direction of home, I thought about a girl who once pocketed a possum tooth as a treasure.

I don't know what a dead person looks like, except in a movie. Cold, I suspect. Maybe blue. A person can look stiff. Rigid. I have read *Stiff*, by Mary Roach, and *The American Way of Death*, by Jessica Mitford, and I know that the deceased never look as they did in life, no matter the skill of the mortician—that embalming is a lost and useless art, that keeps the body looking fresh and human for the viewing and funeral service, but not much longer. It preserves nothing of the original being. It is poor art. A bad sketch. An outline of what used to be. I have never known a person, been really close to a person who has died. I have known people who died, but I didn't really *know* them. Because I have never experienced the death of a loved one, I interpret death through what I read and through animals.

When I read Roach and Mitford, I decided that I never want to be embalmed. I'd rather decay in a natural state. Orthodox Judaism forbids it altogether, and the body must be buried within twenty-four hours of death and allowed to rot naturally in the earth. This is what I want. I see no reason to be embalmed. Embalmed or not, I will eventually leak out of my skin and dissolve into the earth. It is natural. It is life, this leakage of death. It is biology. While alive, human cells use enzymes to break down molecules, making them into things the body can use. The cells keep the enzymes in check. Prevent them from breaking down the cells' own walls. But

after death the enzymes are free. They eat through the body's cellular structure and allow the liquid inside to leak out.

This too—a human heart, if cut off from its blood supply, can continue beating for as long as a minute or two. Then the cells begin to starve from lack of oxygen. In ancient Egypt the heart was believed to be the seat of the soul. Egyptians believed that the *ka*, the essence of the person, resided in the heart. The heart was the only organ left inside a mummified corpse.

Instead of the routine burial, I reject the traditional human passage of death and wish to let myself rot freely. Perhaps my soul, my life after death, will be different.

“Are you serious?” I asked Brian over the phone. “That’s hysterical.”

He just described to me an image he passed on the road. Halfway through his drive, he spotted a dead cow in the median. Around it was a bunch of scattered yellow caution tape, the same stuff police use at a crime scene.

“Like they didn’t feel like moving it,” he said.

I thought of Matty in his plastic bag. What would happen if we treated people this way? A loved one dies, and instead of burying them, removing them from sight, we toss over their body a wrapping of caution tape. *Don’t step on Bob. He’s dead.*

This natural composting might take away the *specialness* of being human. It might eliminate the loss of identity after death. Affect the strategy of exit. In this process, I might be equal to some animal that dies in the woods. Equal to Matty, tossed aside like common garbage, nothing ceremonial or sacred.

On the beaches of Cumberland Island, Brian and I found ourselves in a wash of animal death. The beaches, usually pristine, untouched by man, full of wondering wild horses, were covered with the rotting brown bodies of spider crabs. These bodies did not stink, but they were everywhere, uncovered. We couldn't walk a foot without trying to avoid stepping on one, or two, or three. Everywhere. No caution tape.

“What do you think caused them all to die?” I asked.

“I don't know,” he said. “Water temperatures maybe?” It had been an unusually cold Florida winter, even though technically Cumberland Island sits on the Florida-Georgia border.

We walked a little farther before we noticed a large animal-like blob on the sand before us, not moving. We walked over to it and found, to our surprise, a dead pelican. Perfectly intact.

“I've never seen one of these before,” Brian said. At the time, he was working as a lifeguard at the beach during summer, so he got to see a lot of weird and wild things.

“Me neither.”

Again we wondered what killed it.

“I kind-of want its skull,” he said. “Just look at the beak on that thing.”

From a slight distance, it looked like a normal pelican. The head, long beak, large leathery throat. Up close, though, I could see the deterioration. The skin that formed the basket in the pelican's neck had separated from the actual skull. This material was just skin, a layer that rotted and disintegrated as fast as the feathers flew away. The flies crawling in and out of the dead creature's neck made this separation all the more evident. But the beak was still attached to the skull, and in spite of the death around it, it was beautiful. It wasn't yet white or clean. There were still chunks of leather and feathers clinging to the bones. But seeing it without life, it

looked like a new creature. The neck vertebrae were exposed from just above the wings, running all the way up in an 'S' shape to the back of the skull, the brain stem. Without the leather basket so commonly associated as part of its beak, this pelican looked more like a Pterodactyl, strange, departed. Not from this world.

I have found it to be another worldly experience too, when instead of finding something dead, I kill something.

I was on my way home from Brian's, not even five minutes from his house when I rounded a bend in the road, a blind turn, and saw four sets of eyes glowing in my headlights. I swerved. There was a clunk. Beneath my back tire. I slammed on my breaks. In the rearview mirror I saw, on the side of the road, a mother raccoon staring at me. As if the barrier of the truck around me didn't exist. Just staring. Two little raccoons moved from the middle of the road to her side. The third one did not.

I turned the truck around so that the headlights shown on the path they had crossed. There, perfectly centered in the lane, was a curled up ball of fluff. I could still see its mother on the side of the road, just watching me.

"Hey," Brian said through the phone. "What's up?"

"I just killed a baby raccoon."

"Are you okay?"

"I just killed a *baby* raccoon." Silence. "The mom is sitting on the side of the road, just watching me."

"Lacey, it's just a raccoon," he said. "She's probably sitting over there telling her other kids, 'Now kids, this is why you don't cross the street without holding my hand.'"

I laughed a little, but I felt terrible. It may have been just a raccoon, but I killed it. *I killed it.*

“I’ve never hit anything before,” I said. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You keep driving,” he said. “At least it wasn’t someone’s pet.”

He was right, of course. I did keep driving. But all I could think about that night was that I killed a baby. Its own mother watched it die. I killed her baby.

Another night, on my way home, I saw a bunch of flashing lights, cops, fire trucks, and ambulances.

“Hold on,” I said to Brian. We were talking on the phone. “Something’s going on up here. I’m going to put my phone down till I get through this.”

The road had been blocked. Shattered glass and metal everywhere. The cops were redirecting traffic, routing it around the mess, away from the flipped vehicle in the intersection.

“There was a wreck,” I said after I made it through the traffic. “Looked like a bad one.”

“How so?” he asked.

“The car was flipped.” We were silent for a moment. “I hate seeing stuff like this. I think someone died.”

A few days later, on my way back past the site, in the middle of the afternoon, I noticed a gathering of people on the corner of the intersection. They were gathered around one of those little crosses that people post on the side of the road with a circle plaque in the center that says, in bold letters, “Drive Safely.” The looks on their faces I couldn’t even begin to describe. Some of them were crying. Hands over eyes, over mouths. It was a fleeting glance. The light was green, and I couldn’t stay stopped. I called Brian.

“Someone died,” I said. “That wreck I passed the other night, they died.” I didn’t know why I told him this. He couldn’t do anything. But because I saw the wreckage I somehow felt like a witness, responsible even, like I knew something about this death that made me a mourner.

“I think that’s from a different wreck,” he said.

“What do you mean?” His words were coherent, I knew what they meant, but they didn’t coincide with what I saw.

“There was a motorcycle accident there a day or two after the wreck you saw. It was fatal,” he said. I had heard nothing of this accident.

“Oh,” I said. I was not sure if I felt relieved or surprised, disappointed even. My grief had no place now—I had no reason to feel the hurt I felt at seeing these people. I was not a witness here.

“I saw it on the news,” he said, “but I didn’t mention it because of the bike.”

“Oh,” I said again. It was all I could think.

I still felt as if I should be grieving. I knew nothing of the deceased, except that I was no longer a witness to their death.

On this subject of death—when I was ten years old, on a family vacation to Indiana, I saw on TV a feature on the worst car accidents. Accidents caused by sand storms, smoke, fog—reduced visibility. Multiple car pile-ups, sometimes hundreds of vehicles smashed beyond recognition, passengers deceased, because in such a storm, there is no exit from the road. I didn’t sleep that night. Images of crushed and burned bodies projected on my brain.

I experienced my first car wreck when I was eighteen. It was as minor a wreck as anyone could hope for. A fender bender. I had another wreck a few years later, when I was twenty-one. Still minor. Nobody was injured. But for almost an entire month after that, I was a nervous passenger. Every time Brian hit the brakes while I was in the car with him, I tensed up. Toes curled. Fingers gripping. Pale.

“I got it,” he said, observing my posture and the stiff expression on my face as he pulled to a halt behind a line of cars at a red light.

“I know,” I said. He’s a good driver, very observant of others. “I’m just still nervous.”

“I know,” he said, “but you have to get over it. It was a minor accident. You can’t avoid cars the rest of your life because of a fender bender.” He was right. I couldn’t, and I didn’t. Brian has since been in three accidents. As if *accident* makes it okay.

All three times he was the victim.

All three times another driver didn’t see him.

Reduced visibility.

In 2012 he bought a motorcycle at a car show—a Harley chopper. It’s under construction.

It was under construction when he got in his last wreck, his last accident.

He was driving a government vehicle for work.

A giant SUV ran a stop sign and t-boned the passenger side of the F-150 government vehicle he was driving under the causeway in New Smyrna where the passenger of the government vehicle was pinned between the SUV and a concrete wall and both doors to the government vehicle were jammed shut as the air bags deployed and the driver suffered *reduced visibility*.

Blink of an eye.

One long strewn-together-stream-of-conscious-blur.

Reduced vision.

Later, he told me his coffee spilled when he was hit, splattering all across the dash and dripping from the air vents and visors. He said, “With the air bag residue still in the air, it looked like smoke, and I forgot about the coffee and thought the liquid was oil. I couldn’t open my door. I thought the engine might catch fire, and I couldn’t see a way out.”

Reduced vision.

With no way out, he had no exit strategy.

Not that day, but another, he admitted that he was glad he hadn’t been on the motorcycle. Neither of us needed to say it, say why. All I could think about was what it might have looked like.

Crystal clear images of wreckage.

Sirens.

A sad emptiness already somewhere inside me where I know he will one day, inevitably move beyond my reach, make his grand exit.

I can’t reduce this vision.

No smoke.

No fog.

A painstakingly vivid image of a woman alone in the world. Abandoned. Robbed by death. By an inescapable and unplanned exit strategy.

I deny that he will ever die, can ever die, will ever leave me, is capable of deserting me and leaving me to interpret his absence as I may, to fill his void, his exit, with whatever I can, to be alone. I refuse to think that he may leave me for the peace of rest, for non-being. For the absence of self from body—a deflation of self. An empty shell.

That is what I'll be left with. A shell.

I shall stand beside myself with grief at his inevitable unimaginable funeral, mourn his cessation of life and deny that he no longer exists. I fear being separated from him, apart from him, away from him, in a whole other world from him.

I shall touch his cold stiff fingers and long for the touch he used to offer, the touch that gave me so much comfort—my respite. Touch the lips I love so much and be saddened by his exodus.

I shall note his last appearance in this form, note his essence departing from me, leaving me, never coming back. Gone. An absence. A void. Disappeared.

I am concerned not just with losing him in this life, but in the next. Matthew 22:30— *For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven.* I reject this idea of not knowing each other after death— I reject the idea of *until death do us part*. The Bible would have me believe that in death we become like angels, that we have no relations. Are we gender neutral? What will happen to the identity I've so carefully constructed? Will I no longer even be a woman?

“I don't know,” Brian said.

I just commented on how awful I think it is that people believe that death separates all ties—parents from children, friends from friends, husband from wife—they only recognize each

other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Get to Heaven and see a fellow Christian, not a former mother, or father, or lover. Forget whatever earthly relationships I carried to the grave.

“I don’t know,” he said, as if it’s not so bad to be alone after death. As if it is okay to not have forever together, to be separated by death.

Until death do us part.

My heart will not believe in this separation. If I love Brian with all my heart, until death do us part, and my heart is, as the Egyptians believed, the seat of my soul, and my soul inhabits an angel-like being after death—not me—then what do I have?

I can’t fathom that.

I don’t want to fathom that.

I will not fathom that, that unforgivable unfathomable separation.

THE HARVEST

If the dead do not rise, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!

1 Corinthians 15: 32

I. Amen

Maybe you grew up in a Southern Baptist Church, where you learned about Noah's ark and Adam and Eve (Eve's hair is always just long enough to cover her breasts), Jonah and the whale (well, big fish, to be technically correct), and Zacchaeus. You make paper crafts with lots of red and gold glitter, the stuff your parents hate because it makes a mess of the car. You learn about the fruits of the spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. You sit in an uncomfortable pew listening to the congregation, all of God's people, say *Amen* at every agreement, Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, because God is important, more important than the Super Bowl, or cartoons, or sleeping in. You stare at the same bland white walls, week after week, paired with crimson carpet to hide all the dirt stains, and constantly notice the absence of any greenery, any life—you smell old people in every tiny room of the seven room building, gagging on the overdose of musty perfume. Pink, blue, and every shade of color floods the building in the form of dresses, skirts, and hats, traditional pastels, because you must always wear your Sunday best, and when you ask why you can't wear jeans, like all of the other girls your age, you learn that God cares—God cares what you look like, but only on Sundays.

You learn about love. *1 Corinthians 13:4—Love is patient. Love is kind—is not puffed up.* What era is that from? *Puffed up* is no longer used in reference to pride—it's outdated.

And all of God's people say, *Amen*.

Ephesians 5: 18—Be not given to wine, but be filled with the Spirit. You are told that all alcohol is bad, except the communion wine, because it isn't just wine. It is a representation of Christ's blood. But you must not drink it in any other context.

Even Jesus drank wine.

You learn not to judge. *Matthew 7:1—Judge not lest ye be judged.*

Amen.

Before you pluck the stick out of your neighbor's eye, remove the log from your own.

Matthew 5:29—If thy right eye offends thee, pluck it out.

Amen.

And the Lord thy God sayeth, "Vengeance is mine." Romans 12:19.

Amen.

Matthew 6: 9-13: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

And all God's people say, *Amen*.

II. The taste of sin

When you arrived at Grandpa and Grandma's adobe house, you are all of the New Mexico spirit. Your plane landed several hours ago, and the drive from the airport in Albuquerque to their Taos house has filled three hours. The cold snow is a refreshing change from Florida weather.

Grandma has dinner ready and waiting for you when you arrive, so after unloading your suitcases into your designated room for the Christmas holiday, you gather in the kitchen to eat.

“Wine with dinner?” Grandpa asks. You have just turned twenty-one seven months ago, so the offer is still a little new and exciting. There is never alcohol in your house.

“Yes please, just a small glass,” you say. You are excited. The prospect of having a drink with your family over a splendid dinner is inviting. It makes you feel like an adult.

You notice as you sit down around the table that your dad has also accepted a drink. Your mom has not. She looks less than thrilled that both your dad and you have accepted the beverage. She remains silent on the subject the whole night.

You ask your sister later why your mom was so quiet, what was she upset about? Your sister tells you it was the wine. She was angry that you and your father had wine with dinner. But it was just a glass, you say. Nobody got drunk. Doesn’t matter, your sister tells you. You drank wine. You are a bad Christian.

III. The set up

You’ve been dating someone for almost three years. He doesn’t go to church, and you don’t question him, because you understand his reasons, something your parents and fellow churchgoers don’t grasp. But he comes to church with you when he’s not working, or busy with homework. He hates coming. He says people give him the cold shoulder, ask him why he’s not there every Sunday. He especially dislikes the Pastor’s wife, Mrs. Susie, your past Sunday school teacher. You ask why. He says she’s just mean to him, always looking at him like he’s insignificant. But you never actually catch her in the act, so you take it in stride and quietly

assume that he's just overreacting to the people's concern for his spiritual well-being. After all, they're always telling you that they would really love to see him in church more often, get to know him better. It sounds nice.

Fast-forward to your younger sister's wedding, Saturday, October 29, 2011. You're busy running around trying to get yourself ready, and trying to help your sister get ready—you're one of her bridesmaids. Your mom asks if he (your boyfriend) wouldn't mind showing up at the park at eight in the morning to help set up for the two o'clock ceremony, and he eagerly obliges. Mrs. Susie, the Pastor's wife, is there too, helping set up chairs, decorations, and generally managing affairs that your mother hasn't had time to think about—the men's boutonnières, a lighter for the unity candle, when and how the groom's men will escort immediate family members down the aisle, etc. Your boyfriend is chatting with an elderly member of the church, who is also there for the wedding, when another elderly man walks past and inquires who the young man is. Before the *young man* can answer, Mrs. Susie steps out of her way to pronounce him *Riffraff*. A nobody. This from the Pastor's wife.

IV. The fermenting process

You are six years old, picking tangerines from your neighbor's citrus tree. Climbing, picking, dropping, eating. The unmowed grass is soft beneath your childish feet, bare and blackened by the Earth's flesh.

It is a much looked forward to event, picking the fruits of another's labor. The branches are smooth, easy to climb. Thorny. You must watch out for the thorns.

When you are done, you will take bags full of the orange colored fruits back to your house in hoards, delighted by your riches.

You will peel the hide off the orb, carefully, with interest, to taste the ripened nectar of skin and juice beneath.

In fourteen years, you will taste this nectar again, in a different form. You will taste the bitter warmth of its fermented blood, decaying for months, a home brewed moonshine. And you will enjoy it.

You will think about the process of making wine. You love grapes, and there is nothing wrong with that. You like the product of fermented grapes, and that is bad. The pleasure you get from this fermented product is considered a sin, but you enjoy it anyway. Why shouldn't you? Even Jesus drank wine. Wine is universal. Everybody has wine—Europe is particularly famous for wine.

You wonder if religion, like wine, is universal. Everyone seems to have one, a religion, that is. Perhaps philosophy is a better word—religion is a philosophy. It's possible that God isn't as narrow an idea as you think. In other countries, God has different attributes, even different names, like Allah, or Zeus. In other countries, God is a different being altogether. God is collective. Picking up features and characteristics from around the world. A growing idea, an evolution. God is a name for the space in the human heart that desires transcendence—it is a placeholder for salvation.

Maybe *monotheism* isn't worldwide. You say, "I like the Greek gods,"—let's all be Greek.

Quite possibly Christianity isn't complete. It is un-aged wine. In a sense, the Greeks were more spiritual than modern Christians. At least they were serious about their sacrifices and rituals. What they did was done in earnest, full-heartedly. And they celebrated everything, with wine. Dionysus is your favorite god. He was a good time. But your God isn't Dionysus. Your life mentors would have you believe that God is nothing like Dionysus, and Dionysus is the Devil incarnate. An idol of the Greeks. A false god. A symbol of evil. What happened to the people who believed in Dionysus? Maybe they're all in heaven, having a big party with lots of wine. But maybe they're all in Hell.

Or maybe Nietzsche was right. Perhaps God is dead.

Everyone experiences some sort of spiritual, moral, philosophical dilemma. But what do you do with it? Isn't that the real question? How do you let this thing affect your life? Do you let it tear you apart, from the inside out? Do you ignore it, stuff it away in the darkest corners of your mind? Do you write about it?

Dear Diary,

Everything I ever knew, everything I ever believed in, is gone. It's fallen out from underneath me. What do I do?

You start to wonder if your whole life has been a lie. When it all just slips away, what do you do?

Do you, like Nietzsche, pronounce God dead? Have the people murdered God in silence, ruined Him with their charades? It's not easy to walk away from everything you've ever known. It doesn't happen suddenly, like a revelation. It comes slowly, gradually gnawing at your inner being like rain carves out a canyon, until you are empty. It leaves a terrible void somewhere in

your heart, in your stomach. You subconsciously renounce your faith, and when people ask you what you believe, you answer mechanically, based on a life of church. You know the right answers, you can fool anybody into believing that you are near perfect, but deep down inside, you know it's a lie.

You're a grand master at hiding your emotions. You hold your own strings, a skilled puppeteer—you can make yourself appear real. But when it comes down to it, when the truth begins to slip out, you have no idea what's really going on.

Absolutely no idea.

V. Bliss, the natural garden

At twenty-one years old, you run through fields of blueberries, picking handfuls and tossing them lightly into a gallon bucket, eating as many along the way. It is your own personal Eden. They are fresh, not fermented. They are whole and delicious. And for the time that you are in this field, you are natural and free.

VI. The fall

You are eleven years old. You have just been baptized—salvation freshly impressed upon your growing mind, your longing heart. The Bible on the tip of your tongue—your two-edged sword. A cross strapped upon your weak spine—structurally unsound.

It is your first communion, the Lord's Supper.

The process is slow—a few minutes for personal reflection. The Pastor allows you to sit in silence for an agonizing five minutes to focus and ready your heart for God. You can't focus.

All you can think about is tasting, for the first time, the blood and body of Christ. You know they aren't really blood and body, just crackers and wine. You don't really even know at this point that wine is bad. It's in the Bible, and Jesus drank it.

The deacons walk down the aisle with a silver tray filled with flat cracker-like crisps. You know they are not store-bought crackers. The Jewish woman who sits in front of you made them herself, a traditional recipe. When the plate passes in front of you, you grab the biggest crisp you can identify in the few seconds that you have to inconspicuously choose. You set this crisp on your pants leg and wait for the wine.

After everyone has had a chance to take a piece of the bread, the deacons return to the front of the church, pick up a plate with samples of wine, and walk back down the aisle. When the tray gets to you, you find the fullest looking cup, pick it up, and hold it, careful not to spill.

When everyone has their bread and wine, the Pastor reads a brief scripture.

Matthew 26: 26—While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

He places a piece of the bread in his mouth, and the congregation follows suit. There is a chorus of crunching all around you. You chew your piece slowly, savoring the flavor. It is plain, but good. When the room is silent, the Pastor continues.

Matthew 26:27-28—Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

The Pastor holds the wine to his lips, and around you everyone raises their tiny cups, and tips.

The communion wine is strong in the back of your mouth. It is a feeling unfamiliar to you. It is a feeling you enjoy.

Later, after the congregation sings a hymn and is dismissed, you say to your mom, balancing on the cement parking blocks at the end of each parking space outside the building, “I like the taste of the wine.” You say, “It makes me feel warm.”

“That’s exactly what worries me,” she says.

VII. Death—a metaphor

A friend’s mom is out of town, away for the night. You take a sip, prompted by a friend. Liquid-sour-gummy-worms on your tongue, taste buds singed by the flavor. You do not tell anyone you have tasted this drink for years, because you are ashamed that you have tasted what you think might be alcohol.

It’s funny how things can weigh on your mind. Make you feel guilty. Like drinking red bull at a friend’s house when you are seventeen, and don’t know that red bull is not an alcoholic beverage.

But later, when you are twenty-one years old you will sip a Long-Island Iced Tea. Gulp it, actually. It will not taste like alcohol.

You will have never been drunk.

You will never feel it coming, the stupor.

Will never stop to think about the fermenting process—the grains and citrus used to make the beverage. The harvest of grapes, wheat, and whatever else has been reaped and

fermented and turned into this beautiful concoction in your hand. The taste will be smooth. Will go down like honey. You will not feel the effects. Not feel the weight of your actions.

Not feel the sudden death that waits, lurking, creeping, catching.

You will drift. Fly. Float. Bliss.

Then the reaper will take his bounty. You will feel sick. Weak. Nauseous. Collapse. Fetal position. Cursed.

You will have taken your fall.

Amen.

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