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HUNTING DOWN PIGS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2004

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

Hunting Down Pigs is a hybrid collection of personal essays, ranging from lyrical to braided, which more often than not defy labeling. The essays explore themes of loss, faith, and self-reliance. Growing up Mormon, with all its strictures, and losing her dad at a young age, made faith an issue that the narrator grappled with continuously throughout her life. The narrator questions the validity and purpose of religion in essays like “Possibilities” and “Going to Church.” Specifically, the narrator explores the doctrine of the Mormon church and the effects of such a strict upbringing. When divine intervention fails, the narrator must learn to transfer her faith in God to a personal faith in herself. In essence, this is a coming of age story for the late bloomer, for the forty-something woman who has realized or needs to realize that you can’t rely on God or a man to save you—you have to save yourself, and in doing so you will receive the gift of faith in yourself.

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PART I

PURGATORY

Quicksand. The only way to save myself is to hold perfectly still like a frozen snow angel and accept my fate, yet I will still die unless tossed a life raft by a God who holds the master key. I fight this knowledge and try to swim to the edge. The edge of life and death. The edge of knowledge and ignorance. The edge of fealty and surety. That precipice between the shadow of myself and the reality of myself. I want to frantically flail my arms and legs cutting through the layers and stand above admiring my creation, the angel I had become. But it was just a trick, it wasn't real. Maybe if I could lay my body out perfectly still like Jesus on the cross with only the blood trickling down, then I could make it. I could float to the other side if the currents favored it, pushed ahead like driftwood.

As a girl, I was a master floater. The secret to floating is not to hold your breath. No bubbled fish cheeks. It's the opposite of what everyone is taught. Every time I held my breath, the water would lap over my chest and my legs would start to sink. I would have to push off from the bottom and start again. How can you last if you hold your breath? For the faithful, floating is only a brief moment in time, but for me it is an eternity that I have learned to breathe in.

I AM A CHILD OF GOD

“I am a child of God, and he has sent me here, has given me an earthly home with parents kind and dear. Lead me, guide me, walk beside me, help me find the way. Teach me all that I must do to live with him someday.”

“I am a Child of God” from the

Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

Once, when I was five-years-old, I sang this song while I was lying in my mom and dad’s full-size bed in our trailer in Buckingham, in Fort Myers, Florida. I sang it to myself because a missionary from the church had come into the bedroom with me. My dad was outside working on the trailer so I assume nothing really happened. He must have been helping my dad and came inside for a glass of water, making a detour to the bedroom. I sang it because I was scared and tempted. I wanted him to like me. I don’t think anything happened. I don’t remember much. I remember going outside later and talking to my dad after the missionary had gone. He was on a ladder leaning against the trailer looking down at me. I felt guilty because he thought I was still his sweet, innocent little girl.

I just recently remembered the missionary in the bed with me. I must have blocked this memory for years. Reclaiming a memory is similar to seeing a stranger, but then realizing it is someone you know. Recognition comes flooding in, and oftentimes you want to avoid the

person, but it's too late. They see the awareness in your eyes. You have to stop and say hi.

Pretend that you are happy to see them.

We were encouraged to sing this song when we were tempted or afraid. Did my singing that song on that day protect me? Or was it my dad working right outside? I couldn't protect myself.

I was a fearful child, so I sang the song often, but I would pause when I got to the part about getting an earthly home with parents kind and dear. You took that away from me God. Why? Was it because I wasn't a good girl? I was still singing the song at age six when you took my dad from me. I trusted you.

I need a song now that I can sing to help me when I'm scared, but there is no magic song to change bad into good, to make my miscarried child whole, to make my dad not fall, to make me believe.

GOING TO CHURCH

Concrete wings, not feathered. Hallowed halls. Birds that couldn't fly to heaven, though like me, they tried. Heaven is for the birds—and hell? For the worms. Fly free like the doves on colored windows. Surrounded by white curtains the birds stare at blue sky. Heavy scriptures pull their arms, wings converted long ago, by greed, hypocrisy and ego. Long shiny golden pews sucked them down, on their knees where they needed to be.

Momma entered in her Sunday best, *Goodness Gracious!* Blasphemy still the same. If we left early we were late. Chewy bread sounds like a hammer and nail, the sound muted by capped teeth. The water acerbic and thick, stifles on the way down. Florida, a flowery land, water-locked more or less. The blue sky—a tease like the fair wife of another man.

They would fly to heaven, but worms can't fly. Flexible metal reverberated in the packed room. The bare word of truth is like cold water burning your lips necessary, yet painful. The teacher said to draw a laughing God or a crying one and Momma danced the tango. The baptismal font leaked.

The Carolina Parakeet is extinct the dove will follow. *Annie quit your daydreaming!* Chewy bread. *Hallelujah . . . Hallelujah.* If you chew enough the bread will grow. ;*Buen Provecho!*

¡Vaya Con Dios! The robed stage called, “*Come closer!*” The baby screeched like a dying dove.

THE GATHERING

The blackbirds today hovered, scrambled, commandeered the sky, alternating between diving and soaring. My mom once told me of a blackbird, a blackbird that tapped on a window with his beak *tacka, tacka, tacka*, until he was bloody because her four-year-old sister was dying. Was he the harbinger of bad news? Evil itself? Or a guardian angel who couldn't get through?

THE GIFT

A wobbly-headed shepherdess, a gift is a worm that chews seeds, a barren apple. No life will come from it. Papa gave it to me, *en skön docka*, a beautiful doll, sitting on a shelf, smelling like lingonberries and whipped cream, blond string hair looped like waves crashing on his coffin by the sea. Florida—all that water it was bound to happen.

The scar has never gone away. Raised like a marshmallow swollen with heat, it fills my throat—heave. Sirens are chauffeurs, *auf wiedersehen*, *sayonara*, made in Japan stamped on her foot. If you open the gift then you close the box. A doll is no replacement, yet it remains. If only you could trade places.

A strong-headed shepherdess Papa left for me. One day the gift will be a bird and eat the worm. One day the waves will curl back like a movie on rewind, and a doll will once again catch a child's tear.

A BAD WORD

I assumed I had enough gas in the car and ignored the relentless beeping. I assumed that my husband would always love me and ignored my women's intuition. I assumed that my daughter would always look up to me even when I looked down upon myself. I assumed that my job would not take over my life. I assumed that peanut butter would always go with jelly, that right was the opposite of wrong, that death would not be the end of life.

Assuming that the piece of bridge was attached was presumptuous. You assumed too much, Daddy. I inherited your green eyes and your assumptions. Assume is a bad word. I wish I were six again and you could wash my mouth out with soap. I wish I could wash yours.

I ALWAYS DREAM I'M FLYING

I could have caught you that day Daddy when you were building the I-75 bridge, when you stepped on a piece that wasn't attached, when you fell from the bridge. I could have pushed off from the ground like a gymnast doing a no handed cartwheel, my muscles rigid. Then I would have flapped my arms like wings pushing against the humid Florida air, leaning my body in your direction like a superhero.

If only I could fly, maybe you wouldn't have fallen, you wouldn't have hit the ground, your lungs wouldn't have punctured your heart.

REMEMBERING MY FATHER

His strip of blond hair down his balding head, his green eyes flecked with gold, his Swedish accent and love of pancakes with lingonberries and cream. The green Corvair and sleeping in the back window while he drove.

The tears down Momma's cheeks when she knew he wasn't coming back. I wasn't supposed to remember my father's funeral because I didn't go. "If you go, that's how you'll remember him."

Remembering playing ball instead with the neighbor's black and white terrier, Tuffy, who made me remember that day, who knew I needed to remember, who bit me so I wouldn't forget, who scarred me so I would always remember.

A PIECE OF A PUZZLE

I imagine you stepping on that section of bridge that wasn't attached, like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle that lay in the right area, but hasn't found its place. It had the right coloring, the right pattern, maybe even the right shape, but didn't fit. As it sat half on and half off of the connected pieces, I reason that it could have looked connected. Your depth perception could have been off, and it could have blended together as one cohesive piece, no longer just a bit of cardboard, no longer on its own, but now a picture without you.

PARTAKING THE SACRAMENT

She was fifteen, her head bent in prayer, her long, brown hair a curtain drawn to cover her countenance. The golden pew hard against her round but surprisingly bony backside.

“Amen,” she mouthed raising her head slightly, her green eyes focusing on the young boys passing the sacrament. Her hands remained clasped, the long nails natural and white. She bowed her head again trying to focus on His sacrifice. The bread making its way closer and closer. The bread that symbolized His body. She uncrossed her legs, the nude stockings whispering when they parted. She stared at the little flowers on her red knit dress, starting to count them. One, two, three . . . fourteen, fifteen, so many. Not enough. She pulled at the dress so she could find more, while still trying to keep her head bowed. She stretched the skirt to one side, showing more leg, then she stretched it to the other side. Not enough, so she tugged at the fabric around her waist, her cleavage peeking through. Something flashed in her peripheral vision. She saw a teenage boy standing at the end of her row holding the silver tray laden with bread.

“Oh, God,” the bread is here, she thought. She quickly crossed her legs, reclasped her hands, and waited her turn. As it made its way down the pew she thought about how the bread would taste, dry and chewy, but somehow more flavorful than bread ever was. She thought about how she had repented of her sins, or almost had. How there was one sin that she couldn’t acknowledge. How somehow what she did would never be good enough.

The bread was so close now. Her mother passed the tray to her with her right hand, it has to be the right hand, but there were only crumbs left. She snatched at the crumbs desperate to make it whole, but it just wasn't enough.

BECOMING MY MOTHER

Once, Daddy you were the man just ahead of me in line until he turned his head. You missed getting hit by the bus I was riding until we roared past. I have imagined you reincarnated as my dog. He died, too. Once, when I was very young, I went to the bank with you and somehow we got separated. I looked up at the numerous pant legs and latched on to your leg, but it wasn't you. I ran away in fear when the stranger looked down at me. *Hey, little girl.*

When I look in the mirror now, it's so disconcerting. I see my mother's face as it was when you died. A face you loved. A face you could come back for? I touch my reflection in the mirror, like a blind man, not sure of who I am.

ELECTRA ISN'T THE NAME OF A SUPERHERO

The water drips on my toe like milk from a leaking nipple. I push my toe into the faucet to breastfeed, but the water slides down and wells in the union between the two, my big toe and its domineering spouse. The bubbles are deflating, there are gaps like the continents spreading on the Earth or maybe on the moon. Through the gaps I can see my white flesh, my mountains and valleys, my pink circles. My inflated pillow holds my head, the fig and pear soap entering my nose. I submerge to remove the soap, remembering Momma her fleshy hand holding back my hair in the house on 24th street while I heaved over and over again.

If I come up for air I may drown. The slippery water of truth is like a lover rubbing your legs, smooth and silky one way, prickly and sharp the other. I come up gasping for air. The water no longer laps at my body, but like the ocean creeping higher on the sand, it envelops me and I decide it is time to get out.

I wrap a towel around me and walk to the window, admiring the light seeming to emanate from the moon, yet fully aware that the sun is the only illumination in my universe.

MY MOM

There was a restlessness about her, whether it was endlessly rearranging the living room furniture back and forth on the worn linoleum floor, or flip flopping on her hair style. “I’m growin’ it out,” she’d tell me in her slow Southern drawl, or “I chopped it off,” back and forth. It was hard to believe her anymore when she said she was growing it out because I knew her. Just like before, this declaration wouldn’t last.

I pulled my fingers through my own hair, long and blond, hair that I had only cut short once when I was fifteen.

When we’d arrived I’d helped her change out of her stained, pink-flowered moo moo that zipped down the front, into her emergency room gown, her large frame stooped.

Now I watched her writhing in the hospital bed, her short, slightly curling grey hair flouncing as she switched from one side to the other and back again. The morphine drip was no longer working. She started moaning. A deep and scary sound. She was supposed to be invincible. I often referred to her endearingly as a tough, old bird. I was proud of all that she’d been through in her life, all that she had survived.

With my eyes I followed the medicine dripping in the IV tubing, watching its route into a large vein on the back of her hand. Her fingernails were gnawed, pushed into her fingers like little tiles in mud. I looked at my own fingernails, naturally long and white.

“Momma, I’m here,” I said grabbing her hand. Her eyes darted around and then locked on mine, but no words came out. She held onto my hand as I imagined she would have held onto my daddy’s hand when she was in labor, squeezing hard with each contraction of pain. She had birthed me and the pain had stopped. Now I needed to stop her pain. I let go of her hand and went into the hall. There were no doctors or nurses around.

She would have known what to do, she always knew what to do, but now it was my turn. I searched my mind and the small room, my eyes lighting on the little red button hanging off the side of the bed.

I pushed the red button and waited.

POSSIBILITIES

I was four when my mom told me that Santa Claus wasn't real—four. In her defense she says that I asked, and she didn't want to lie to me. She should have lied. It could have changed my life, that ability to believe in something unseen. That moment when everything real is staring you in the face, and you still see pixie dust and possibility.

Two years later I lost my dad. He was a believer—he believed in God and in America. He came to the United States from Sweden to live the American dream. I wonder what he thought when he landed in New York. This was after Ellis Island closed down, so he didn't have to stand in lines to be decontaminated. Did he believe that the streets were paved with gold?

Whenever I think about gold, I imagine his eyes. All I have to do to see them is look in the mirror. Green eyes flecked with gold. That's how my mom described them, smiling as she looked into my eyes. I imagine him young and in America with a full head of hair, before he went bald. I have his blond hair, but only because I dye my mom's brown hair away.

An onlooker would say he didn't live the American dream. Yes, he got married and had me, but on the day he died he was a temporary laborer in construction living in a trailer in Fort Myers, Florida. Yet, he still believed. Even in death I'm sure he believed.

I'm sure because he was devout, a devout member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons). He believed in God and goodness, in good overcoming evil. We joined the church when I was just nine months old. I have his baptismal certificate and

certificates for each level he attained in the priesthood, a man's power in the church. He wanted to get sealed to my mom and me for time and all eternity—meaning after death—but he didn't. Time was something he ran out of.

Faith is important in any religion because God isn't walking around making it easy for you to believe. There are a lot of similarities between God and Santa Claus. They are both do-gooders; they keep track of who's naughty and nice. If you're naughty you're punished, and oh yeah—you can't see either of them.

The Mormon religion is no different. There's this great mystery, “cultized” conception of the church, but the core concepts are the same as in any Christian religion. They believe in God, and Jesus, and the Holy Ghost (i.e. Spirit), but they believe that they are three separate beings. They believe in the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, but they also believe in The Book of Mormon. This is where they differ from other religions.

My father died because he had faith. Faith that the piece of bridge he stepped on was attached. It wasn't. He fell, landing close to the water's edge. His lungs punctured his heart. His job was to build a bridge to carry people safely from one side to the other. This is something I have imagined he still does, helping me from the other side, but maybe that's just a lot of pixie dust.

After he died, everyone at church tried to console me saying what a good man he was. “That's why God wanted him.” Billy Joel's song “Only the Good Die Young” reverberates in my head whenever I think about God taking my father away from me. This is a selfish God, but

at six I held on to the belief that I would see my dad in heaven one day. Santa wasn't real, but surely God was. I looked to all the adults who believed, giving their testimonies every week in church, talking about faith, preaching the Bible and The Book of Mormon, and it seemed to be everywhere. The Waltons believed. The Ingalls believed. If you didn't believe someone would probably look at you like you were putting peanut butter on eggs. Unnatural.

I remember sometimes feeling a shiver go down my young spine while I listened to stories in church, and I would think it was God or the Holy Ghost letting me know that they were there. That it was true. I remember when someone first read the poem "Footprints in the Sand." It made me shiver when it said that there were only two footprints because that is "when I carried you." One Sunday, as I sat on that hard pew, they told a story about a group of teenagers who went out to a restaurant after church and were killed in a car accident. They should have obeyed the Sabbath and not gone out to eat. Then they would have lived. That was the message. I shivered.

A year after my father's death I learned the whole truth. I was lying on my bed in my room, and my mom came in and sat down next to me. She told me she was going to be married in the temple to my soon-to-be step dad, Richard. I glanced at the framed picture of my mom, my dad, and me on my dresser. A black and white picture in a gold frame, the glass broken. My dad was holding my hand.

I was sad, but this news wasn't anything new to me. I knew she was getting remarried. Now it wouldn't just be her and me, now I wouldn't be allowed to sleep in her room, now I would be second best, now she would forget my father.

“I know Momma,” I said, trying to be like she wanted, a good little girl.

But then she hit me with the whammy. “You’ll have to decide who you want to be sealed to—your daddy, or me and Richard.”

I always thought I would be with my mom and my dad in heaven, but now I had to choose one or the other. My tears were mixing with my runny nose. If I picked my mom, I would never see my dad again. If I picked my dad, I would never see my mom again. I wiped my face on my shirt.

“No, I want to be with both of you.”

My mom soothed and patted, all the while cooing words of sympathy. “You don’t have to decide now. It’s okay. It’ll be alright.”

I had an ache that went from my throat to my stomach, a hollow feeling. My cheeks hurt from being opened in unvoiced screams.

What kind of horrible God would do this? Death became more real to me that day than the day my father died. Years later, when I was fourteen or fifteen, I screamed sitting up in bed, awoken by a nightmare. Listening to animals scurrying in the rafters overhead, I tried to relax, recalling why I’d woken, remembering my dream. In my dream, my mother chose my step dad over my dad and me. She made it clear that she didn’t want me. It wasn’t a hard decision for her. Perhaps I’d dreamed this because I’d found out that if she’d wanted to, she could have gone to the temple and been sealed to my dad and me, even after his death. It’s called doing work for the dead, but she didn’t. Maybe she had planned to, but then she met my step dad and everything

changed. My dad didn't have to live for us to be sealed to him. My dad wasn't the one who didn't believe.

I'm married now with a daughter of my own. She is sixteen, and I have never taken her to church. I don't want to distort her mind. I encouraged her to believe in Santa Claus, breaking the truth to her when she was ten, maybe a little excessive, but I told her the truth about God from the beginning.

"I want it to be true, but I'm afraid it's only a possibility."

I still haven't made the decision that I learned over 40 years ago. I can't forsake one for the other like my mom did, and I can't imagine a heaven without her. So I never got sealed to either of them. I haven't been to church in many years. My faith has been tested, and I've failed. It is as hard for me to believe in God as it is to believe in Santa. If there is a heaven, I will walk alone. Or if I believe in the scriptures, I won't be there to see it.

FOUR MEMORIES OF MY FATHER

I have two dolls that remain from my childhood. They have lived in at least nine different closets over the past thirty something years—some small, some large, still just filled with clothes. One of the dolls is a shepherdess holding a staff, the other a small girl with blond ponytails kneeling in prayer. The shepherdess is made of blue felt with blond string hair looped like waves. She is soft yet frail; her head wobbles. The praying girl is made of glass and wears a pink nightie. Her eyes are closed. When I think of them, it's like I “discover” them again, on their high shelf, I am surprised that they are still there collecting dust, yet whole.

The red VW bug was not one of the fancy new jobs I see scooting around today with a vase inside to hold a flower. This was the original 1969 hard top, the back window curved to cradle me on long trips. I remember standing on the black running board holding tight to the silver rim on the door while my dad drove down the small dirt road in front of our house. We didn't need any theme parks. This was fast to me. I was only five.

My dad sitting in a boxy green velour chair, shirtless, fleshy, and I told him I didn't have to listen to him. I only had to listen to my mom.

“Momma, is this a real memory?” I asked my mom one day, years later.

“Yes, it really happened.”

“I was sort of hoping it hadn't,” I said.

“Yes, it happened, and your daddy took you into the bedroom and had a talk with you that day,” Momma laughed.

“Was he really mad?”

“Your dad wasn’t one to lose his temper. He was easy going, but he let you know that you *did* have to mind him.”

My mom is large and southern and tough, sort of like Paula Deen from the Food Network. It is hard to find someone to compare my father to. I would have to know him well for that.

I was at my grandma and grandpa’s house in Ft. Myers. A small house, in a small subdivision, with a cactus in the front yard. Someone fell in the cactus once, and my mom had to pull out the stickers. I don’t remember who it was. Why do people have cactuses?

The memory is of my aunt rushing into the bedroom where I was playing, and saying that someone had been hurt. I remember hoping, praying it wasn’t my mom. I was right—my prayer was answered, but in praying for one thing I left out the other.

Later, when the news came, I was congratulated for my maturity. While my aunts, uncles, cousins, grandma, and grandpa were crying all around me, I was strong. “It’s okay, Grandpa.” I patted his arm. The invincible shrimp boat captain that had tackled alligators and won was sobbing, head in his hands, elbows on the dining room table. At six, I was seemingly unaffected; at least that’s what I remember. Seahorses swam in jars in the garage, but my father was dead.

The two dolls seem to get along, but I imagine them fighting when I close the closet door and turn off the lights. The shepherdess is meek, the praying girl obstinate. “That’s what she prayed for,” the praying doll says.

“I know, but she didn’t mean it,” the shepherdess says.

“He’s better off; he’s in heaven now.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

I go back and turn on the lights. “Come back to life,” I whisper, but the dolls remain silent.

On that day, my mom was sitting in traffic on the same street that I used to ride my bike to school. I remember that long road and the Florida heat. My grandma would walk with me while I rode my pink and white bike to and from school. She was always looking for money, telling me to be on the lookout. “See a penny, pick it up, all day long you’ll have good luck,” she’d say. This was her mantra. It didn’t matter if it was heads or tails.

Momma later told me that she had to sit on that road, waiting that day, for an ambulance to pass. I wonder what she was thinking as the ambulance drove by. *Hurry up!* Or, *That’s so sad!* Or, *I feel bad for that stranger.* What thoughts go through your mind as an ambulance passes? Usually we are in such a hurry that we don’t even stop to think about the life inside.

Later that day, when she got back to my grandma’s house to pick me up, she learned that the ambulance was most likely the one carrying my dad to the hospital. This was before cell

phones, a time when you couldn't reach a loved one in minutes. In later years, I would imagine that if she'd been reached, maybe she could have been in the ambulance, maybe she could have said goodbye, but one day I asked my mom. She said that he had died on impact.

It was October, presumably a nice day for Florida. Not too hot, not too cold. My dad, Kurt Randolph Wiklund, wouldn't have been affected by the cold anyway. He was Swedish, balding blond hair, green eyes flecked with gold. My eyes. He moved to the United States when he was twenty-two. His accent was strong. I have an audio tape of one of his phone conversations. He's talking to my grandma and grandpa in Ft. Myers and he and my mom are in Chicago. Chicago is where I was born, but this is before me. I would have loved to hear him say my name, but it is wonderful to be able to hear him at all. My mom's name is Thelma and he couldn't say the th sound, so it came out as Telma.

He loved my grandparents—they were like parents to him. I see now why family was so important to him; he didn't have a close family like we did. My Swedish grandmother, Sophia, didn't marry his dad, Auguste. I don't think he even knew his dad. I also learned that when he was young his mom sent him to live with someone else. This other person raised him. I don't know why he was sent away. I can't imagine sending my child away.

On that October day, he was on a temporary job, in construction. He took whatever job he could find to support us. He was helping build I-75, the new interstate that would run north and south through the state of Florida and continue north all the way to the Great Lakes.

The story goes that he stepped on a piece of the bridge that he must have thought was connected, but it wasn't and he fell. He landed on the shore, very close to the water. I wonder if it would have made a difference, a few inches? A few feet? His lungs punctured his heart. I've never pictured him falling; I don't let myself. I would start to imagine it, but then I couldn't continue. Even in my dreams he doesn't fall, and in my dreams I fly.

My fourth memory of my father is of the funeral I didn't go to.

"Do you want to go?" my mom asked.

"Yes, I want to talk to him."

"He won't be able to talk to you, sweetheart."

"I still want to go."

"If you go that's how you'll remember him."

So instead, I stayed with a neighbor named Wiladeene and her Boston terrier named Tuffy.

I remember playing catch with Tuffy that day. Throwing the ball as far as my six year old arms could manage. Tuffy running back, excited. She was too excited. She couldn't wait for me to throw the ball and she reached up and grabbed it out of my hand, biting me in her eagerness. I still have the scar on my wrist. I still remember that day. Tuffy made me remember. I can never forget.

Perhaps I should have gone to the funeral, but then the scar of the dog bite on my wrist might have been replaced by a deeper scar. Would this one memory make the difference for me? To feel like I really knew my father?

I was still wondering about this when my grandfather died a couple of years ago, at the age of 84. He wasn't invincible. I went to his funeral. I saw his body. It wasn't him anymore.

In 2008, I opened the front door and saw my father. For a moment I could believe it was him. It felt like a miracle, but it was my cousin from Sweden. He found me after thirty-four years of no contact on either side. He had the same eyes, the same balding blond hair, and I heard that voice. The same voice.

I pretended he was my father for just a few minutes, but his tattoos denied it, his many children denied it, his beard denied it, his wife denied it, and so I had to accept it. He is someone who looks like my father, but he is not my father. He is my cousin, my father's nephew, my aunt's son. But he does have my eyes.

Like most babies, my daughter, Alana, was born with blue eyes. I watched them carefully to see if they would change—if they would become my eyes, my father's eyes, and one day when she was almost two, they did. It was wonderful to see him living again through her. To see myself in someone else. I saw that he would live on, but then a few weeks later the color started to fade, eventually changing into my husband's brown eyes with just a hint of green. Beautiful eyes, but he was gone again.

I remember when Alana turned seven. It was a special day to me. Yes it was her birthday, but more important than that—she was no longer six, and her daddy was still alive. My husband, Guillermo, also lost his father when he was twelve. When we were dating, this was something that brought us together, but I was also jealous. He had his father twice as long as I had mine. But now twelve doesn't seem long enough. One more year until she's twelve.

I walk into the closet to look at the dolls. On my bedside steps I reach high and pull down the shepherdess. I look into her innocent face covered with dust, and I imagine my father giving her to me. I don't remember this, but I know he did. She was a gift from him. It seems so wrong that this doll has been with me all these years, thirty-four years that he hasn't. The praying girl is easier to get since she is kneeling. She is also a gift, one that I've denied. One that has not shed a tear in all these years. Maybe I should bring them out—display them where I can see them constantly. “No,” I whisper to myself, “The shepherdess' head is still too wobbly.”

A SPLASHLESS ENTRY

My dad had two major falls in his life. The first time he was twelve and fell out of his bunk bed. The bunk bed made with birch wood, not because I know, but because birch (*björk*) is *the* tree in Sweden. When I visited my cousin Bosse in 2013, I marveled at the birch framed art, and the birch branches used as jewelry holders, their slender, elegant limbs with small nubs mimicking a fruit-laden tree. There are so many trees in Sweden.

Perhaps he was having a nightmare, tossing and turning just a little too much. Was he afraid of spiders? A school bully? The dark? What does a twelve-year-old boy have to fear? Perhaps he feared abandonment. He never knew his father, and he was raised by a foster mother from the time he was a toddler.

Maybe when he fell it was part of his dream. He didn't know it was real. Maybe he thought he was diving off the high dive and would make a splashless entry into the water, or maybe he had that feeling I've often had—the feeling that I'm falling and I jerk myself awake in fear only to feel enormous relief when I realize that I'm only dreaming. There would be no relief for him.

He went into a coma. He was in a coma for two years. When he awoke he said that he could hear what was going on around him, but he couldn't move or communicate in any way to let people know. That's why I'm always sad when I hear about people pulling the plug on family members in a coma. I believe it is possible.

He had to learn how to do everything again. Like he was newly-born. He had to learn how to walk and write again. Before his fall he had beautiful penmanship and could play several musical instruments, but not after. I have a box labeled *Kurt's Things* that my mom gave me. It has his shaving kit, his cufflinks, his letters to family in Sweden. I try to decipher his chicken scratch, and I ache to see his penmanship before the accident, just one perfectly formed letter.

His second major fall was when he was working in construction, building a bridge on I-75. I don't know how I heard this story, but it goes like this: He stepped on a piece that he thought was attached, but it wasn't. He fell.

I want to imagine that perfect dive, that 10, but all I see is the fear. The drained pool. The hard ground so close to shore. His lung puncturing his heart. This time he knew it was real, he wasn't sleeping.

TRAVELING

I used to throw up on trips when I was a girl, when time was measured in the number of “Are we there yets?” I’d sleep and wake up disoriented—the asphalt slick under the tires, like the hum of a refrigerator and the occasional bump jarring, a knock on the door of a sleeping house.

My insides all rushed up trying to escape my body. Is this how I will feel when I die? My spirit rushing out, my body fighting the awakening, not wanting that release.

I want someone to be there to hold my hair, to give me tissues to wipe my mouth with, and water to ease the pain. I want my momma’s shirt to yank on, “Are we there Momma?”

A NEW BEGINNING

“The way in is also the way out.”

—Anonymous

Every day I pass the cemetery. There is no one there I know. Neat and tidy unlike my house or my mind. Everything is easier when you're gone. My dad is buried in a cemetery, but I don't know where it is. I was there once, but I haven't been back. In my mind I lie down beside him in our family plot. I want to find him when I'm ready. I'll wander through the maze, like a dog knows its way home. And then I remember it's rational to begin at the end.

LITTLE WHITE LIES

At least you had a father. You'll be together again one day in heaven. Only the good die young. *Like that's supposed to console me. I should be happy that he was a good person and God took him from me. Aren't you proud? Couldn't God do without him? Someone so powerful had to rip him away from me, a six-year-old little girl? Where was he when the roaches were in my room, and the snake hung from the ceiling over my bunk bed, inches from my face, where was he when it was time to give me away? Only the good die young. That saying seems so flip, so easy, but it's a lie. Bad people die too. If they didn't there might be an argument for switching sides. At least you had a father. Yes, but barely. I was six. I have a few memories to sustain me, most of them bad. I do remember riding on the outside of our red, Volkswagen Bug, standing on the foot rail, holding onto the little silver lip around the door, while he drove me around our property. I think I remember. I was told the same stories so many times over the years that I'm not sure if it is a real memory or a picture I created from what I was told. Here's what I remember: being at the bank grabbing my dad's leg and realizing it wasn't my dad; it was a stranger (That second of loss was frightening, but just a short time later he was gone forever. That pain never goes away. I know it's illogical, but sometimes I still search the faces of strangers hoping that one of them might turn out to be him. Several times I've seen men that look like him, or at least like his pictures, the green velour chair my daddy was sitting in when I told him I didn't have to listen to him only to Momma, Grandpa crying at the dining room table when we found out, telling him it would be all right, not going to my father's funeral and instead*

getting bitten by the neighbors' black and white Boston Terrier, Tuffy, who left a scar on my wrist so that I would always remember that day. You'll be together in heaven. We could be, maybe. If I believe in heaven and if what Momma said isn't true. My momma told me I had to pick. In the Mormon Church, I could be sealed to my parents "for time and all eternity," but my mom wasn't sealed to my dad. She got remarried and sealed to my stepfather, so I could get sealed to my mom and stepdad, or to my real dad. I couldn't have both. Decisions, decisions. Nobody knows what to say when someone dies. So they lie, little white lies.

CHICAGO

I dream of moving back to a city I don't remember, to feel the wooden steps as I climb to our 3rd floor walkup on Hoyne. I dream of dancing in the freezing wind off Lake Michigan, muffled in scarves and imaginings, your gold green eyes your blond hair leaping. I dream of the smell of allspice and mustard from the Christmas ham we bought at Ann Sather's. I will trace your steps walk in the store and ask for the same. I will go to the Swedish Covenant Hospital, looking at the babies in their clear plastic beds, going back 42 years, Baby Girl Wiklund, five pounds, three and a half ounces. I'll wonder if you were here, on this bench, in this park, looking at this same sky, living and breathing.

FEAR: FOUR EXAMPLES

I was eight-years-old, sitting on my twin bed in our mobile home in Fort Myers, when I figured out fear. I was looking at a black and white photograph of my mom and dad and me, at the glass in the frame broken. My dad was shirtless. Blond, hairy legs, his balding head. Momma's brown hair was poofed into a 60s do, and I was hiding behind my dad, my arm wrapped around his leg.

It was weird that I hadn't realized what death meant a couple years earlier when my dad died. When my mom had asked if I wanted to go to his funeral, I asked if I would be able to talk to him. At six death was not real, but somehow looking at that photo, being without my dad, I suddenly understood. Not every story ended with happily ever after.

I bawled thinking about never seeing my dad again, thinking about my own mortality, not being. Later, I wanted to be a bodiless head like on an episode of *Star Trek* I had seen, so I could live forever. As long as I could think, I could be. This was years and years before I ever heard of Descartes.

I pretended to be a city girl. I'd moved to New York City from Pennsylvania, and I was starting to get the hang of it. I always picked a seat in the first car of the subway on my ride into Manhattan, to be close to the driver. He was in his little booth of course, but still it helped me feel a little less vulnerable. I was lucky my station was at the terminal, so I usually got my pick of seats. I wore my sneakers or boots to work and then changed into my dressy heels. In the

morning, I'd sometimes stop at the bagel place by my office: Madison Avenue and 33rd Street. I got a kick out of ordering something in the mail and telling them my address: 164 Madison Avenue, NYC, NY. The representatives usually oohed and awed about how exciting the city was, and I agreed.

On the way home, I took the *N* again, choosing a yellow or orange seat, sometimes having to make do with a pole, learning to balance, trying to look like a New Yorker. Once, while being brave, I stopped at the A&S Mall before heading home. On the way to the mall I was one among many. I almost didn't have to walk; it seemed as if the crowd would carry me along. I was fine until it was time to go home; I caught the subway under the mall, but I wasn't familiar with the station. It was deserted in areas. There were homeless people lying around. A stench of urine.

After I got off the subway there were often catcalls, strangers noticing me, especially if I had worn my heels home. Once, I heard the click of feet behind me as I got closer to my apartment. It was winter, and by then the streets were really dark. It was usually dark by the time I left work at five o'clock. I remember hurrying to get behind the first locked door, looking back at the silhouette behind me.

According to *Psychology Today*, "On September 11, terrorists did more than destroy buildings; they scarred the American psyche . . . Pharmacists report an increased demand for anti-anxiety drugs." Sixty-two percent of those polled said they had difficulty sleeping. Fifty-seven percent took steps to protect themselves—like taking precautions when opening the mail

and staying away from public events. People are scared of doing something as commonplace as opening their mail; they're scared of things that belonged more in a science fiction book than in the United States: chemical weapons, biological weapons, nuclear weapons, plastic knives used as weapons, hairspray containers housing bombs. Now a box in the theater, behind your seat, or by the side of the road could be a bomb or maybe even worse.

Anxiety is a nicer way to say fear. Per *Psychology Today* Generalized Anxiety Disorder “exaggerates the amount of danger arising from a potential situation. People with GAD tend to overestimate the likelihood of harm coming from a given situation and view minor or ambiguous events as catastrophes. If normal fear is an alarm, GAD is a false alarm you can't turn off.”

I was there for the first attack in '93, worrying with Pam, my co-worker whose husband Chris worked for Dean Witter at 2 World Trade Center. We watched the news together. Finally Chris called and told her that he was fine, he had made it out.

My husband, Guillermo, and I moved to Florida one year later. We never said it was because of this. We were New Yorkers. We were tough. No, we moved because of the weather, to have a nice place to start a family, to be close to friends. Seven years later it happened again.

Startled out of a deep sleep, I hear the spraying airplane hovering above. I can't breathe. I wish I had bought one of those special masks. I decide not to wake up my husband and daughter, better for them to go peacefully in their sleep. The plane keeps circling, again and again. The air is stagnant. The oxygen rushing out. Maybe it's just insecticide for the Florida mosquitoes, breathe, relax, maybe that's all it is, maybe, maybe.

I wanted to call Pam, to confirm that Chris was okay, but we had lost touch. It had been a few years since we had spoken, and it seemed in poor taste to call then, but I wanted to know that he was safe.

The list. Finally, they got to the *Es*, then the *Els*, *Daphne Ferlinda Elder*, *Michael J. Elferis*, *Mark Joseph Ellis*, *Valerie Silver Ellis*, *Albert Alfy William Elmarry*. No Ellinghaus. He was safe. Realistically, I didn't even know if he still worked there. I didn't even know if he was still alive before 9/11, but somehow it was important for me to know that he hadn't died there.

I remembered their wedding at the yacht club on the North Shore. A violin trio had played during the hors d'oeuvre, circling around to each table. Everything was impeccable. The dress, the menu, the cake. As Chris and Pam finished their first dance as man and wife, I walked outside with Guillermo and watched the boats bobbing on the water. It seemed like a fairy tale.

SUPERSTITIOUS

Every day I dress my breasts, pick them up and place them in their cups of lace or silk, actually a silk wannabe. My breasts are unsightly—large, veiny, protuberant, like enormous colored Easter eggs that have been cracked, their shells removed. They are pale and lumpy with three fine, dark hairs adorning each nipple. Hairs that I pluck when I think they'll be seen. I started developing when I was in the fourth grade, and my breasts steadily enlarged until reaching their present size in the eighth grade.

Men leered at me, and I learned to hide inside large t-shirts hung to my hips making me seem thick and straight. Mr. Wurst, my eleventh grade chemistry teacher, told me I was sexy. Pretty is what I wanted to be, but sexy, that gave me a bad feeling inside. When my high school tennis coach massaged aloe vera onto my sunburned shoulders, I worried if he thought I was sexy too.

My breasts are still heavy. My husband, Guillermo, will come up behind me and cradle one in each hand. I feel so light and free when he does this—it gives me a break from the heaviness. My back straightens a little for just a minute, but then he lets go and they are mine again to carry.

I missed having my mammogram when I turned forty, so here I am at Florida Hospital, just shy of my forty-first birthday, gearing myself up for this awkward procedure. This is my baseline—the mammogram that all the rest will be measured against. These younger cancer free

breasts will be compared with the older, prune, hanging-down-to-my-waist-like-dried-fruit, version they will become. A bad spot having to be cut out.

When my turn comes, the technician plops my breast on the colossal machine. Trying to make small talk I say, “That’s a lot lighter. I should get them cut off. Uh . . . just kidding.” She keeps going about her business, but it seems she is rolling her eyes even though she’s not. She has that look. What am I saying? I sometimes do that. Something stupid just pops out at the wrong time. That’s definitely the wrong thing to say while I’m getting a mammogram, but I’m not worried. They aren’t the best breasts, but every time I’ve gone to the gynecologist my breasts checked out fine.

After getting squished and squashed almost to the point of tears, I get dressed, and walk out through a waiting room full of people, feeling like everyone knows that I was just naked.

I’m back at the hospital again. I’m meeting with the clerk, so she can get my information, my money. I notice my chart lying next to her on the desk, so I use a skill I’ve mastered over the years as an elementary school teacher, reading upside down. The scary truth is confirmed—abnormal right breast—and somehow it feels like the chart is staring at me, like in a child’s game, trying to see who will blink first. Well it’s true, the right one has always been a little larger, and so if I had to pick the traitor I would pick that one. Maybe if I don’t blink, I’ll win and the words will somehow say something else. But of course I realize that paper can’t blink.

“So that’s \$137.40. That’s if the insurance pays their part,” the clerk is saying. I blink, trying to focus on her and not on the paperwork. This is a small cubicle. I see pictures of what I assume are the clerk and her two children. It is hard for me to identify the clerk sitting in front of me with the woman in the photo. In the photo she is laughing, huge sunglasses on her face, hair down. The children have matching smiles. Sometimes you can’t recognize something even if it’s right in front of you.

Somehow the words written on the paper are more frightening than hearing them over the phone. When the nurse called me a couple of days ago to tell me I needed to get rechecked because I had a nodular density, it didn’t sound as bad as seeing those words, “abnormal right breast.”

After I hung up, I immediately went into my classroom’s bathroom at work and tried to feel the culprit. No luck. It felt strange being in a classroom, the kids gone, leaning down to look in the kid-sized mirror to look for a lump. Later that night, lying wrapped in flowery Ralph Lauren sheets, I tried again, slightly more determined. Still nothing. I didn’t try too hard because I was scared about finding it. Then it would be real. I asked my husband to try. It felt strange for him to be touching me that way, without any desire. He didn’t find it either, his attempt matching mine—tentative, like searching for a mine in a minefield. You don’t really want to find it.

Today’s technician introduces herself. She isn’t the same one as last time, but somehow they all look the same in my memory. Middle-aged, brown hair, someone you don’t mind

undressing in front of. Average breasts. She tells me to undress from the waist up and go and sit in the inner waiting room, the one for women.

“So we’re all gonna sit around naked?” I joke since she forgot to mention the dressing gown. She laughs in response. We both know the routine. She hands me the dressing gown, tells me to put my stuff in the locker, and pulls the privacy curtain shut. I’m never sure if these gowns are supposed to open in the front or the back. The last time I was here I had the opening in the front, but whenever I watch medical shows on TV, the opening is always in the back. I guess it depends on the occasion. Like strappy shoes or loafers. I decide since my breasts are the ones being examined, I’ll leave it open in the front, but having it open in the back would be more appealing, especially since I don’t have to worry about pulling a Jack Nicholson, like in the movie *Something’s Gotta Give*, having my tushie peeking out.

The locker reminds me of high school and the years seem to fly away for a minute, gray metal with a key instead of red with a combination lock. In those days my only worries were trying to get an A on a test, or deciding what I wanted to be when I grew up. It doesn’t seem that long ago.

I fold my shirt and decide I don’t have to hide my bra underneath, throwing everything quickly in the locker. I put the key in my pants’ pocket.

The technician miraculously appears and guides me into the room with the machine. “You aren’t wearing any deodorant or powder, right?”

“No,” I say, imagining the super hidden strength of deodorant that would stop the x-rays from taking a good picture of my breast. Would it protect me in a nuclear attack too?

This time there are more poses, leaning down, leaning up, leaning sideways, trying to find the 1.6 centimeter enemy. I don't joke with her anymore. I don't say anything, just recovering my breast in between takes.

"Okay, that will do it. Just sit in the waiting room for a minute, and I'll see if we need to do the ultrasound too."

I wonder if it is a good sign or a bad one to have to do the ultrasound too.

The inner waiting room is positioned between mammograms and ultrasound. It is spa like with water fountains, lowered lights, and incense. The waiting room has three other women. Two older ladies, and one woman my age. The younger woman's name is Regina. She works in the cafeteria at my school. I wonder if she is here to show me that I shouldn't just be thinking of myself, but then it's selfish of me to think that cosmic forces are using her for my benefit.

We acknowledge each other with a nod, our throats constricted. Talking seems out of place here, and she seems to have been crying. We both nervously look through the waiting room magazines, turning the pages too rapidly to read them. One page does break through my fog. It is a collection of lingerie, beautiful bras and panties, expensive brands like La Perla. They should go through these magazines before they put them out here. It is like watching a movie about a family after your own child has died, showing you everything you will not have.

The time drags on. I flip through several magazines. I notice that Regina and the other ladies have tan dressing gowns on while mine is blue. I wonder if this is some sort of a code for the technicians. Selfishly I hope that if it is, then blue is the better color to have. Maybe it's a sign, a sign from God pointing out the afflicted. I scrunch my eyes closed like a child pretending

to be asleep and make a pact with God. If he lets me be cancer free, then I will believe, wholeheartedly, like I never could before.

Growing up I always made pacts with God and listened for a sign that he agreed. If Princess could live, if I could get the guy, if my dad could hear me in heaven, then I would be good, better than before. I would interpret a scratching branch or a crash of thunder as agreement.

Eventually my name is called, and I'm led back to ultrasound. I remember ultrasounds fondly from when I was pregnant with my daughter Alana. It was a time of wonder and anticipation, seeing the heart beat, finding out that I would have a girl. This is different. The technician puts a foam wedge under my right side, instructs me to raise my arm above my head, and squeezes warm gel on my skin.

I don't say much while she slides the magic wand around trying to find the lump. She looks serious. I don't think she can find it, or maybe it looks bad.

"I'm going to remove the cushion, but I need you to lean to your left, okay?"

"Uh huh. You can't find it?" I ask.

"It's in the posterior section. Right in front of the chest wall," she says.

"So you found it?"

"Yes."

"The nurse said it was 1.6 centimeters," I say.

"Yes, that's about right."

I wonder if about right means it's really more, and she doesn't want to say so. I wait a few more minutes while she moves the wand and the mouse around. Finally she's done.

"Can I speak to the radiologist to find out if it's good news or bad?" I ask.

"I'll bring these to him and be right back," she says.

What if it is cancer? What if I really have to get them cut off? I don't want that. For all the ingratitude I've had over the years, I never wanted that. What if it's worse than a mastectomy? What if there are no more tomorrows to do everything I want to do? To travel. To write. To love. Then I remind myself that cancer isn't the death sentence it once was, at the very least I would have a few years left, probably. I calm down, breathing deeply. I can handle it. I'm pretty happy with my life. I've talked with my husband about dying before. He knows I want to be buried under a cherry tree. I assume he'll remarry quickly. He says he won't. "You'll miss the sex," I said to him. "I'll just get a blow up doll and put your picture on it," he said, keeping a straight face. I turned red, laughing. We both laughed. He loves embarrassing me.

The main thing is leaving my daughter. I won't be there for those difficult teenage years, and she has never been close to her father. I've done the best I could, but it's often felt like I was a single parent. I worry what will happen to her without me. Will he be able to step up and give her what she needs? I've been a good mother. I don't yell at her. I don't hit her. We laugh together, act silly, and I hope that will sustain her throughout her life.

A couple of weeks ago I told her she needed to get ready for bed, and she asked if she could wait until the commercial came on.

“Does this channel have commercials?” I asked.

“Yes, they do,” she said.

“Okay, we’ll see,” I said. Then about fifteen minutes later a commercial finally came on.

“See, I told you,” she said as she went out to brush her teeth.

“Oh yes, the great fortune teller that predicts commercials is here,” I laughed, bowing in mock reverence, as she came back into the bedroom. She started laughing then. “Oh powerful one,” I said, and then we had a good old-fashioned pillow fight. Well, actually she was the only one with a pillow. I got clobbered. I love her laugh.

But then I think of the worst thing of all. The thing that bothers me more than dying, more than leaving her—it will be in her genes. I’ll give her breast cancer. That is not something I want to give. I’ve only ever wanted to give her the good things in the world like love, kindness, honesty, integrity, a love for life. To think that she might have me to blame for getting a horrible disease. To think that she might die before her time . . .

Where is the technician? I listen intently for movement outside the door. I imagine her coming in with bad news. I do not imagine her coming in with good news because it will be worse when I hear the reality. Tears are starting to accumulate in the corners of my eyes. I am trying to be strong. Remember your pact.

“It’s good news,” she enters, smiles, “It’s a cyst,” she says.

I hug myself, wrapping the gown around me, squeezing my breasts. My body feels familiar. I know it; it is mine.

PART II

THE SHOOTING RANGE

I sat down to write about my miscarriage today, trying to make beauty out of pain, using you like a tabloid photo, but I couldn't think about all that blood resembling a murder scene, about spreading my legs to un-birth you. I couldn't think about having two girls instead of one, about that extra little chromosome. Instead I thought about going to the shooting range for the first time, and jumping when the gunpowder hit my bare legs, and then, going back week after week, until I no longer noticed.

There were blood clots in the toilet that looked like the liver I removed from the cavity of the turkey on Thanksgiving. I would prep the turkey, baste it, bind it, and use the metal rack to collect the juices. A couple of times, I removed the turkey from the oven and realized I had forgotten to remove the giblets.

I knew to expect the clots. This was supposed to happen. The doctor gave me misoprostol (Cytotec), to make it happen, and instructions, "If they get larger than a golf ball, go to the E.R."

Misoprostol is the same medicine that induces labor, the poor mother-to-be waiting hours, days, for her little one. The labor harder because she was induced.

I watched the toilet trying to determine if I was okay. Were they too large? If they were long and flat, it was hard to know if they were as large as a golf ball. Was I supposed to imagine the whole thing smushed together, or measure the diameter of the largest point? I was scared of what I might see. What if I saw the baby?

The State of Florida's website posts these tips for firearms safety:

- **Never** store or handle a loaded firearm in the home. Tragedy can occur in only one instance of negligence.
- Keep a trigger locking device on the firearm, in addition to keeping it locked away, as an additional safety factor. There is no such thing as overemphasizing firearm safety.
- **Lock** firearms and ammunition in **separate locations**. This is a good backup precaution.
- **Never** point a firearm at anyone, loaded or unloaded. Too often the unintentional discharge of guns, even those believed to be unloaded, have killed or wounded innocent persons.
- **Educate** everyone in the home about firearms safety—especially children.
- **Firearms are not toys!** Emphasize the danger in, and outside, the home. Give reinforcement training frequently.

- Firearm owners **must always** remember that a firearm may protect life, but it can also be a potential deadly threat to innocent persons. The proper storing and handling of a firearm must always be foremost in the mind of the owner who is responsible for the safety of those in the home.

Section 790.174, Florida Statutes, requires a loaded firearm in the home to be stored in a locked box container or secured with a trigger lock if the owner reasonably knows that a child under the age of 16 can gain access to the firearm. A violation of this law is a misdemeanor.

Even though we live in Florida, we got our gun after hurricane Katrina, when I heard that children were being raped in the streets. I wanted to be able to protect our daughter, Alana. I imagined chaos, an apocalyptic world. My post 911 brain envisioned nuclear bombs, chemical bombs, and biological weapons being unleashed. Unleashed. I think of taking the leash off my dogs, and them waiting for their treats. Pebbles will bite me if I try to give it to her out of my hand.

A Glock 17 has 17 bullets in one magazine. I wonder how something as innocuous as a magazine, something you look at in a doctor's office, got this name. Which one came first; I want to go to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and find out. My Glock reminds me of a toy gun, something that the boys used to play with when I was growing up, pretending to be G.I. Joe or cops and robbers, only it's heavier.

I say “my Glock” because this is my gun. It’s registered in my name, even though my husband, Guillermo, and I bought it together at *Shoot Straight*.

We went to the *Shoot Straight* on Orange Blossom Trail in Apopka. As I walked inside, I saw a giant stuffed bear, a lion, and other numerous animals, both predators and prey. The bear and lion were whole, from the tips of their claws to the ends of their tails. They had been alive. They were magnificent, but they didn’t belong here. They were dead.

I was leery of everyone in the store. I had heard about people getting shot at gun ranges, and I thought criminals might buy guns here, too. I tried to look like being here didn’t bother me.

The blond, feather-haired instructor recommended the Glock. “It’s reliable. You can shoot it over and over again and it won’t jam. Plus it’s easy to maintain,” he said.

Then he gave me a brief lesson. “The first thing you need to know is how to hold it. You put your dominant hand on the grip and then wrap your other hand around it. Make sure you don’t put your finger on the trigger. Your finger should point straight out on the outside of the weapon,” he said.

“Like this?” I asked. I had my finger on the trigger, but then I fixed it. Luckily, it wasn’t loaded. It was understandable though that I would hold the gun by the trigger, that was how I had picked up play guns when the boys left them lying around when I was little. Sometimes I would even chase after them.

“Yes, and even though it’s not loaded, you need to get in the habit of not pointing it at anyone,” he said as he pushed the barrel down and away from him.

“Sorry,” I laughed looking somewhere between him and the floor.

“Now, you need the proper stance. You need to put your feet shoulder width apart, with your dominant foot slightly forward, like this.”

I tried to approximate his example, feeling foolish.

“Now lean forward slightly. Good,” he said.

“With the Glock, you don’t really have to pull the trigger hard like with a revolver, just slight pressure, that’s why you definitely can’t put your finger on the trigger until you’re ready to shoot,” he said.

“Where’s the safety?” I asked.

“There is no safety,” he said.

It would be so easy to kill with this weapon, no safety, a touchy trigger, and an inexperienced shooter. I could do it. I had to be able to do it.

He showed me how to load the magazine, pushing down on the spring loaded chamber. He looked so capable like a police officer, or better yet like a Navy seal.

At first I tried to put the bullets in backwards. The bullets took me back to when I was living in New York City when my husband and I were first married and Colin Ferguson’s shooting spree on the Long Island Railroad. He killed six people and shot twenty-five. He used

hollow point bullets that exploded on impact, so they would do more damage once they were inside the target—the person. When I heard about that I never, ever thought I would be shooting a gun one day.

I've since learned that hollow point bullets have dual roles, the fact that they spray out on impact means that you can use them to cause more destruction to your target, or you can look at it in a different way: you can use them to stay in your target and not destroy other unintended targets. They are less likely to go through the target and then hit an innocent person than other bullets.

The blood clots were getting larger. I didn't want to analyze the contents of the toilet, but I had to. I was unsure of myself. It was hard to compare something big and flat like liver to a golf ball.

My doctor had given me the medicine so I could “pass the baby” and avoid a D&C, destroy and confiscate, but this wasn't like passing gas or a kidney stone. This was a baby.

“We need to go to the E.R.,” I told my husband. I knew he wouldn't look. He wouldn't even go to my grandmother's funeral. He wouldn't be able to help me confirm the size. He didn't deal with death.

I sat next to Alana, our three-year-old, in the backseat, her brown pony tail drooping, wisps of hair escaping, her eyebrows crinkling. It reminded me of when she was a newborn and

the skin between her eyebrows was wrinkled from childbirth. She looked like a little worrywart, and I, being a new mother, was worried they wouldn't go away.

"Don't you worry. Mommy's going to be fine." I clasped her hand, the same tiny little hands that prayed for mommy to get pregnant. She had been so excited when I told her I was pregnant.

"I love you baby," I said to both of my babies.

When we got to the E.R., and I told the nurse that I had taken misoprostol, I noticed that she gave another nurse a look, and then they asked me who my doctor was. I realized they thought I might have aborted the baby. Maybe I should have gotten a second opinion when my doctor said that the baby had stopped growing. You hear stories about people who are given horrible, dire predictions about their unborn babies, and then they're born and everything is fine. It makes them seem so brave, so faithful, but a little holier than thou, too.

The doctor said my baby had Down's, but I didn't believe it.

Or

My doctor said my baby had water on the brain, but look at her—perfectly healthy. What do they know? God knows, and I prayed and prayed, and everything turned out all right.

But I will never forget this one story that a sister in the church told me. She said that when she was living in Arizona, her pregnant friend had been kidnaped by someone who wanted her baby. The friend thought that God would protect her and her baby, that because she was

wearing the holy undergarments that Mormons wear no harm would come to her. She was wrong though. She was cut open, the baby was taken, and she bled to death. Looking back on this story, I always wonder how the story got out if the woman died. How did anyone know what she had been thinking? Maybe she told the kidnapper? I wonder if they ever found the baby.

After speaking to the nurse, she made us wait. I knew that emergency rooms took patients on a triage basis, and I guess they knew that there wasn't anyone here to save, but the baby was coming. I didn't know how much longer he or she could wait. I felt the contractions that should have been a prelude to a new life. The rhythm, the pattern. I imagined the doctor asking me how far apart my contractions were and me starting my breathing exercises: *hee hee, hoo hoo*. I couldn't do any of those things.

Finally, they called my name, and when I stood up I saw blood on my chair. My husband told the nurse and she gave me a pad to put on the chair. The pad looked like the ones you use for your dog if they are indoor dogs, and you can't take them out.

This was the same hospital where I had Alana. I can't forget being wheeled out of the delivery room saying, "I'm ready to do this again." I would never get to do it again.

My doctor arrived, the same doctor that delivered Alana. I didn't realize then that it was unusual for your doctor to show up in the E.R., usually the attending doctor would handle it.

"You were bleeding too much, huh?" she said putting her hand on my shoulder. "You probably got most of it out. Let me see. Slide down for me. Lower. Lower."

My butt was already at the edge of the exam bed.

“Open up. Relax,” she said.

I gave in. It was way too late for a second opinion.

“That’s good,” she said.

My feet were in the cold stirrups. It made me think of a horse I had ridden as a girl. My friend was a champion rider, and when she started galloping on her horse my horse followed. I held on for dear life, my feet in the stirrups, my arms wrapped around the horse’s neck, my fingers wound in its mane.

When the doctor had given me the pills in her office a few days before, she confirmed that the ultrasound showed that the baby had stopped growing at around 12 weeks, and I was around 15 weeks. There was no heartbeat. She had said it was nature’s way, and it didn’t mean that I couldn’t have another child.

“Yeah, looks good. You have a little left.” She inserted what felt like a long wire hanger that had been straightened out. She poked and prodded. A few minutes later she said she had the fetus sac. Do you want to see it? It’s a little bigger than a golf ball.

“No.” I couldn’t. I imagined a clear sac like one of those pictures you see in health class, a big eye attached to something that looked like the tadpoles I used to catch in the backyard. Why did this have to happen? Was it something I did or didn’t do?

“We’ll send it off for testing, see why you miscarried,” she said.

“Thank you. Thanks for coming,” I said.

I remember a strange dream I had when I was a teenager. I was in the secret service, protecting the President and First Lady, but it wasn’t the then current President, it was Teddy Roosevelt and his wife Edith. Where did I get them from? It didn’t make sense to my conscious mind, but regardless they were under attack, men were firing with automatic weapons and me, I had a little pea shooter. I had to pump my gun by pulling the trigger several times, then finally, when a round came out it was the size and shape of a pea, and it didn’t blast out, explode out—no, it arched out in slow motion and gently, very gently, plopped under the skin of the bad guys. It was an unfair fight. I was giving it all I had, but I still saw the clear body bags being zipped up, the President’s face, his round spectacles, his moustache. I felt helpless. How many people shoot guns in their dreams?

In the Florida Statutes, The Castle Doctrine declares “that a person has no duty to retreat and has the right to stand his or her ground and meet force with force if that force is necessary to prevent death, great bodily harm or the commission of a forcible felony.”

I listened to the shooting range instructor and watched his stance as he shot.

“You want to lean into it,” he said. “And relax.”

I had my ear muffs on, my safety goggles, and I aimed at the target. The target was a man, a black silhouette, with no face, no eyes, and a red center for his heart.

I couldn’t get over the fact that there wasn’t a safety on my gun. I should have gotten a gun with a safety.

I just had to put my finger on the trigger and *Boom!*

I spread my legs, leaning forward

“Don’t lock your elbows,” he said.

Boom! My arms jerked back.

I wanted to jump when the gun went off. I felt something prick my bare legs. At first, I thought I had been hit, just for that split second before I realized I was okay. I didn’t know what it was, but it was something minor hitting my legs, like a swarm of gnats. It was so loud and my senses were both muffled and heightened at the same time. It felt like I was underwater, in slow motion, everything blurry.

I bent down and rubbed my legs. My black shorts a sharp contrast to my white skin.

“Something pricked my legs,” I told the instructor.

“That’s gunshot residue,” he said.

I was back at my doctor's office, back in the stirrups.

"Everything looks good," my doctor said. She wheeled back a little and I pulled the sheet down over my legs.

"We got the lab results back. It was a girl. There were too many chromosomes. It was the body's way of handling it. It knew there was a problem. Take a couple of months off and you can try again," she said.

Another girl. A sister for Alana. Just one extra chromosome, something so small, but with the power of a bullet. I unbirthed you. It wasn't natural.

I researched to find out what having an extra chromosome meant. I learned that it wasn't inherited, yet if it happens once it is more likely to happen again. Having an extra chromosome can happen to anyone. It means that the cells divided incorrectly. It's random.

I had expected something to go wrong. I remember as a teenager I dreamed of having a baby that fit in the palm of my hand, and I had another dream where I was breastfeeding my baby and I looked down and saw that it had a beak instead of a mouth. My breast ached from the beak clamped on it. So it wasn't a surprise that I miscarried, not really, but what if my expecting something to go wrong made it go wrong? What if the influence of positive thinking was absent? Could I have done something to stop it?

I keep shooting, round after round. Line up the rear and front sight, shoot. *Boom!*
Boom! Boom! Seventeen times. Release the magazine. Reload the magazine. Snap the
magazine into place. Pull back the slide to load the chamber. Legs set. Lean forward. Elbows
unlocked. Line up the rear and front sight. *Boom! Boom! Boom!*

The gunshot residue swarms around me, but I no longer notice.

I flip the switch to reel in my target, bringing him closer, so I can examine the damage.

MY DAUGHTER

She would have been a weaver, weaving threads between the Earth and stars into a gown of enchantment. She would have been a dancer, leaping through deserts of mirage. She would have been a dreamer, envisioning skipping stones clear across to the other side. She would have been a believer, trusting in a God who dreams of skipping stones too, a God who allows all daughters to be born. She would have blown kisses that I would have clutched in my hand.

GROWING UP

A split-level house, a woman hiding her pregnancy. A baby is the paper in a book, a tape continually being recorded over. My cousin Mike, on his unicycle, balances between sky and earth. The marshmallows blister in the bonfire forming a loose skin, and the fireflies smell like honey sticking in the night. Chicago, a city changed by wind, eroded into an old man concealing a thirty-eight. Today we celebrate the birth of a nation as Marlene's prosthetic limbs groan with every move, her ponytail leaning to one side.

A baby is the preface in a book, lying in a cradle of feathery grass it dreams of the cherries falling off the tree. Yippee! It doesn't know about the porno magazines or the shower with a peep-hole in the basement. If you don't grow up then you can never die. The Coriolis Effect is the result of the Earth's rotation on its axis. Marlene twirls under the night sky.

The stars are misleading, but one day the book will be finished. One day the prosthesis will no longer be needed. *Annie, wake up!* If you wake up you can read the book. The book coaxed, *Read me*, and I read while the fireflies explored the sky and a cherry fell to the ground.

VISITING GROUND ZERO

I shall begin with the smell of the dead, mixed with the drizzling rain, the ground unearthed, ready for planting, small organic and inorganic fragments of fertilizer. The nearly 3,000 dead.

I shall stand beside the firefighters who raised the flag reminiscent of Iwo Jima, but this time an American flag on American soil. I will hold the flag to my lips and see the Japanese soldiers hiding in their caves. I'll watch the ashes falling like snow wishing they would melt, the water racing away in rivulets.

I shall touch the photographs bowed by the chain link fence, like the black corners in our family photo album. I want to turn the photos over to find the name, the date, the holiday. *Oh yes!* I can hear mom saying, *that's your great Aunt Virginia. Do you remember her?*

I shall note the remaining walls that look like the Coliseum in Rome, walls that will be torn down quickly, walls that will be replaced with something new and sleek, walls that will always remain, walls that will conjure the Gladiators going into battle.

Every step was a hesitation, a brief seesawing of thought, as I made my way into Manhattan, the city that never slept, the big apple that I had taken a bite of for three years, the only place where ordering a hot dog could be considered sophisticated, like ordering a latte at Starbucks: "Give me a venti, nonfat, caramel latte extra whip."

I boarded the *N* train at Ditmars and Astoria Boulevard feeling exposed, the above ground track seeming such a contradiction to how I was feeling. I wanted to hide, to burrow in the tunnel with the East River enveloping me, like those famous city rats the size of cats. That was me on this day. But I still went. I went to see what I would see, to see what I was, what I would be. There were only a few others on the train, and everyone had the same expression, fear and bravery coexisting, an internal tug-of-war.

New Yorkers don't smile at each other. That's normal, but what wasn't normal that day was that we looked each other in the eye, seeing everyone for the first time.

I remember the blind violinist that would make his way from car to car on the train, braving the unknown steps between the moving cars. He would lay his black fedora on the subway floor ready for our applause, our tokens of admiration. I can hear his music, smooth notes that belied the strings, and I know that he would have loved to be able to look everyone in the eye, and somehow I know that if he were here he would be able to see our expressions.

LIGHT AND SHADOW

Sometimes I envy the homeless. It's not that I want to live on the street, or be hungry. It's not that I don't sympathize with their plight. I do. I can imagine being so mentally or physically impaired as to end up in the same situation, but what I envy is their lack of pretense. No more masks to hide behind.

Ten o'clock on a hot Friday night, driving through the streets of Orlando, feeling like we were in a city again, Guillermo had to swerve to miss something in the street. It took a few seconds for the disbelief to sink in: a person lying in the street. I remember feeling horrible several years earlier when I hit a squirrel, looking back in my rearview mirror, watching its tail twitch up and down, but this was a man. The idea that you could hit a man if you weren't paying attention, threw me for a loop.

One thing I like about teaching third grade is that there are no pretenses. Third graders are not yet adept at hiding who they are. You know which students are honest, which are selfish, which are liars, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. I wish the same were true for adults, but we have learned to hide who we really are. To fake it till we make it.

The summer I was fifteen, on the precipice of adulthood, was the summer of my first serious crush: Truman, a boy whose bowl-shaped haircut didn't dissuade me. The summer of

finally becoming free of my parents by going on a temple trip to Washington, D.C. and New York state.

In anticipation of the temple trip, my best friend Traci and I had gone on a crash diet. We subsisted on toast and Postum (a fake coffee for Mormons to drink) and both of us had lost around twenty pounds. I could now fit into a size seven. We then had the glorious fun of shopping for smaller sizes for the first time, and it felt wonderful. This was a time to reinvent ourselves. I had just gotten a perm, a somewhat long-haired shaggy poodle look, and Traci had her hair in a bob.

We headed out for our second day at the mall. The first day we had bought mainly clothes, so on this day we carted along our big shopping bags full of clothes to accessorize.

Towards the end of the day we traipsed into JC Penney, which, while favored more by our parents, had had a great sale the day before. Traci and I, in our matching striped pant purchases, hers were red and white striped and mine were purple and white striped, were tired but happy. We looked through the jewelry, the purses, the leg warmers, and the hats. We wanted to be Material Girls just like Madonna, and this was the first year we were allowed to go shopping without our moms. This was the first time I felt like I was trying to be something I wasn't.

Traci went into the fitting room to try something on and I went into an adjacent stall to wait.

“My feet are killing me,” I said to Traci.

“Why don’t you change your shoes? You have other shoes in your bag, right?” she asked.

“That’s a good idea,” I said.

So I changed my shoes and I ended up changing my whole outfit because it didn’t match.

After we left Penneys, we went to Lerner’s, which was a little more hip of a store. I was looking through a rack of clothes by the entrance when a strange, elderly man put a shiny badge in my face and said, “JC Penney store security. Come with me.”

Oh my God! What is happening! My eyes said as I looked at Traci. We followed the man out of Lerner’s and back into Penneys into a little room by the beauty salon.

“Okay, put all your stolen things on the desk,” he said.

I started pulling the items out of my shopping bag when Traci stopped me. “He said all your stolen things,” she said emphasizing the word stolen.

“Oh,” I said.

“We didn’t steal anything,” I said.

“I saw you go into the dressing room with one outfit on and come out with another one on,” he said.

“Well, you see, my feet hurt, so I decided to change my shoes, and then my shoes didn’t match my socks, and my socks didn’t match my pants, and then my pants didn’t match my shirt, and so I had to change my whole outfit, you see?” I said without taking a breath.

“Do you have receipts for these items?” he asked.

Luckily I hadn’t changed purses, so I proceeded to empty my purse looking for receipts for each item. At the end, there was only one item left in question, a purple sleeveless cowl neck tee from Penney’s. I had a receipt that just said clearance \$4.00. He still doubted me, and called a sales girl back and asked her if this shirt could possibly have been the item for \$4.00.

“Yes, it’s possible,” she said.

The security officer had started changing his tune as I produced a receipt for each item in the bag. I guess he thought that if I were a thief, I wouldn’t have a receipt for anything, and now he was actually smiling at me.

“You know the only reason I noticed you changed clothes, is that you guys looked like the Bobbsey Twins when you came in,” he said.

I smiled back, not really knowing who the Bobbsey Twins were, not really believing that he could have thought we could have done something like that. Couldn’t he tell by looking at us that we were good girls?

After he let us go, Traci and I collapsed on a bench laughing hysterically, while a guard by the door looked at us suspiciously. Did he think we had gotten away with it?

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”
Are you sure William? Or should I say Billy?

The chicken or the egg? The character or the name? Unlike a dog that you may wait to name by watching their personality (is he a Speedy, or a Skippy?), a human is given a name to become. Nicknames. Real names. Pseudonyms. Monikers. What's in a name? Dependability? Credibility? Stupidity? Unreliability? Bambi—dumb blonde or naïve deer? Would she be smarter if her name were Sheila? Or maybe Steve? What about Thomas becoming Tommy? What does that hurt?

My name isn't prone to nicknames. No Anna-Leesy. My first nickname was Sissy, southern for sister. I was the eldest of three. Then dingy, like a little boat? More like Archie Bunker's Dingbat. I'm Edith. But my brains defied my name. So instead I became Chicken Little. Gifted with a yellow fabric chicken doll with string legs and orange felt feet. How can I hold up the sky?

I need a strong name. Like Atlas or Zeus. But I am a girl, and my name will always be weak. Sheila is never as strong as Steve. Perhaps a unisex name like Stacey or Sandy. But that wouldn't make me strong. It would only make the men weaker. My courage needs to defy my name. Who will name me next? Will I let someone tell me who I am?

I could go out, sure. Dinner for two, candlelight. Something new. Thai? Indian? Kim Chi? Or like we used to—dancing, merengue, hanging onto Guillermo for dear life. I remember the goat, “chibo,” was surprisingly good. Or maybe someplace hip. Which is? Don't know. I'll have to ask Kathy at work. She always knows what's going on downtown. The where, the

when, the who, the what. I'll have to remember not to ask why. She probably won't be a good source for long though. She's pregnant.

Or maybe, girls' night out? Cruising, laughing, flirting, almost getting arrested for shoplifting (fun only in retrospect). I didn't do it! Remembering what it felt like to be 15 or 16, heck 25 or 30.

But no, I can't.

I have to be responsible, respectable, up by five. Immediately on the treadmill. Trying to remain vertical. I don't wear the safety key, the wall right behind me. Flossing, taking my vitamins, being the best mother, the best teacher, the best student. Having time for the necessities. There's toilet paper beside the toilet (not necessarily on the dispenser). There are clean clothes to wear. Water in the dogs' dish. Once I forgot. I watched my puppies drink and drink and drink. Necessities sounds so much softer than needs. Not so demanding.

Some days I want to be one of those people who just stays home, doesn't call in sick, doesn't have a care in the world, but I'm not independently wealthy. My grandfather isn't the Zipper King. I don't have a maid who irons my underwear.

If I want to be a good mother, then I need to have time with my daughter. If I want to be a good teacher, then I need to stay late. If I want to be a good student, then I need to study for hours.

I could go out, sure.

The water is a prisoner handcuffed to the earth frozen in silky sheets eager to feel the stroke of mercurial scales the pressure of a wooden bow the tentative fingers of a sapling hold your breath The water is a prisoner handcuffed to the earth yearning to catch a youngster plunging from a spinning rope to emerge in small swells to suck the wind and taste the sun hold your breath

I see the elated faces of my third graders making shadow puppets while I project their assignment on the whiteboard. They make a dog, or a bunny, or a bird, making the dog bark, the bunny hop, and the bird fly. Then I show them a better dog, a better bunny, and a better bird. They are impressed and try to imitate me, moving their hands.

In the *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato said that philosophers could see reality while everyone else saw only the shadows that reality cast, not even realizing that there was something else causing the shadows.

What is reality? Sometimes it's hard to see even if it's staring you in the face. I want to believe it's a bunny instead of someone pretending.

It is hard to see through the shadows. I've made my own shadows. I've believed in my shadows.

I imagine my students seeing only the shadows, not being able to see my hands, not knowing that a shadow of a dog is all illusion. I know that sometimes they only see what I want

them to see. I fear that we sometimes see only what we want to see. We need to stare directly at the sun. But as a teacher, I know that staring directly at the sun is bad for your eyes.

HUNTING DOWN PIGS

Day One

I am in solitary confinement in my own home. The windows and doors aren't locked, but I am trapped. I sit on my four-poster cherry bed contemplating my situation. I can faintly hear my husband and daughter talking in the family room, but I can't go to see them. If I call out they will come, but I dare not.

It started with a routine visit to the doctor's office three months earlier. They check your ears with that pointy thing, they make you stick out your tongue and say "aw," they feel your throat, and they listen to your heart and lungs with their stethoscope. The feeling your throat part was what got me.

"It feels a little enlarged," Dr. Toochinda said.

"It could be my lymph nodes are swollen because of my allergies, right?" I asked.

"Maybe, but I think we should get an ultrasound just to be sure."

My family teases me about being a hypochondriac, and maybe I am, but I am definitely knowledgeable about symptoms and possible causes, and I would argue that I'm not a hypochondriac because I really do have symptoms. You can't be a hypochondriac if you really have symptoms. To be a hypochondriac you have to make things up, but then I saw a quote

about hypochondria on the internet. It said hypochondria is the one thing a hypochondriac doesn't think they have.

I have never considered myself to be mentally ill. Yes, I admit I do have some anxiety, mainly about my health, and about a lot of other things too, but I never thought I crossed the border into mental illness. Actually, at my old job, my nickname was "Chicken Little." I earned the nickname honestly, because I am a scaredy-cat. I won't do anything to cause waves, to buck the system. I was even gifted a fabric chicken doll with string legs to further establish the moniker, but it is worse than just being timid. My fears sometimes get the better of me.

If I'm going on a trip, I worry that there will be an accident. If I'm going to the beach, I worry that I'll drown. If I'm going to the mall, I worry that someone will abduct me. I avoid doing anything on my own whenever possible. I drive to my Aunt's house in Palm Coast (an hour and 15 minutes away), and I'm so proud of myself, like I've really accomplished something. But usually I go with my husband, and he's driving. If it's late, and I need to go to Publix, I'll try to persuade my husband or daughter to go along. Someone may try to kidnap me.

The only exception to this rule is with medical problems. I go to all my doctors' appointments alone. I went to my infectious disease doctor alone (he's married to Dr. G., Medical Examiner). I went to my ultrasound appointment alone and found out that my baby had stopped growing. When I was bleeding out and needed an emergency hysterectomy, I drove myself to the emergency room.

I've found out that hypochondria is often associated with other mental illnesses including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). According to the National Institute of Mental Health, people with generalized anxiety "can't get rid of their concerns, even though they usually realize that their anxiety is more intense than the situation warrants."

Symptoms of GAD:

- can't relax
- startle easily
- difficulty concentrating
- trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- fatigue
- headaches
- muscle tension, muscle aches
- difficulty swallowing
- trembling, twitching
- irritability
- sweating
- nausea
- lightheadedness
- having to go to the bathroom frequently
- feeling out of breath
- hot flashes

I thought I just worried too much. I was a worrywart, but now I have a mental illness. Something else to worry about. Do I warrant that classification? Or is the ever-expanding DSM IV, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, just making worriers worry even more?

Day Two

I don't want to get out of bed and take a shower, but taking a shower is one of the items on the checklist of things to do. All my secretions are highly radiant, so I need to shower often to wash away any sweat or oils.

As I walk to the bathroom I feel weak, and I am not sure if I am imagining it or not. The water is hot, and I think of the sweat on my body crystalizing into particles of radiation that can cause another Chernobyl. The water oozes down the drain, and I wonder if it will be turned into drinking water.

I tell myself it's not that bad, that I'm being melodramatic, but then I remember being given the radioactive pill. They said if I threw up they would have to call a hazmat team to clean it up. I don't think this is my generalized anxiety disorder at work. This is normal worry. Perhaps.

After I get out of the shower, I try to read one of the books I brought to ease my captivity. I start with the number two book of Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series, *Two for the Dough*, but I just can't concentrate for the length of time needed, so I switch to a magazine. *People*. I flip through page after page of stars in gowns until I finally find a meaty article. It is about a new star, an unlikely star, it is about J.R. Martinez, an actor and an Iraq war veteran who had forty percent of his body burned. He was the winner of *Dancing with the Stars Season 13*, and he was permanently disfigured when his Humvee hit a roadside bomb. About that day he

said, “I do believe everything happens for a reason, and I’m extremely grateful for that day because it led me into this life!”

He is one of those people that handles adversity well, that makes lemons into lemonade. It seemed to me like he was bragging. It reminded me of growing up in the Mormon church listening to people giving their testimonies, the because I am so faithful I am strong crap, and God only gives you what you can take.

I don’t know if I can ever feel grateful for the day I learned of my diagnosis.

The surgery to remove my thyroid had been successful, and this had been the first time I hadn’t thought the worst. Usually whenever I have symptoms I Google them and pick the worst (most often deadliest) disease to be the cause for even the mildest symptoms. I think I do this to protect myself. At least if I think it’s the worst I will be prepared if it really is, and if it’s not the worst no harm done. But this time was different.

I thought I was just like my mom. We had the exact same thing at the exact same age. Bleeding out hysterectomy at forty-one—check, benign thyroid nodules at forty-two—check. Nothing to worry about.

I guess that was why I was unusually calm this time, not imagining the end of the world, the death of self, the insidious cancer that was attacking my body without as much as a moat to defend itself. During the consultation with my surgeon, Dr. Rosado, I’d vacillated about whether I needed to get my entire thyroid removed when we didn’t even know whether it was cancer.

“We won’t know until five to seven days after the surgery if there’s cancer, and if it is we’ll have to go in and reopen the incision a week after the first surgery. That wouldn’t be good,” Dr. Rosado had said.

“But it seems senseless to remove my thyroid if I don’t have to. Plus I’ll have to be on medication for the rest of my life. What would you do?” I asked.

“I would have it removed. Better safe than sorry,” he said.

I’d called my mom to get her opinion. “Momma, it seems crazy to have my thyroid removed if I don’t have to. It’s probably the same as yours, nothing. I just had my hysterectomy last year. This feels like elective surgery.”

“I know, Sweetheart. You can wait and see, but for your peace of mind it might be better to just get it out.”

I had been blindsided. I was in Dr. Rosado’s office to hear the results from the lab.

“It was a 1.6 cm well-differentiated papillary thyroid carcinoma” He’d added some more medical jargon, but I knew, especially being a hypochondriac, I knew as soon as he said the word carcinoma. He must be mistaken I had thought to myself. This time I was safe.

“Don’t worry. It’s the best cancer to get,” he said with a smile.

He must be joking. Why is he joking? The best cancer to get? What is wrong with this guy? I’d thought. He’s laughing about me having cancer.

“So, it’s cancer?” I checked again.

“I’m afraid so, but again it’s the best cancer to get. It’s treatable. With radioactive iodine we can get all of the cancer. It will be like you never had cancer.”

I couldn’t believe that. My entire being felt different. I was on the opposite side now. I never really thought I would get cancer. I knew that once you have had cancer nobody blinks twice when you get it again. What is the name for a hypochondriac that is really sick?

I could almost see the pre-cancer sanctimonious angel on my shoulder fighting with the cancer devil on my other side.

“What’s radioactive iodine?” I asked.

“It’s really simple. You’ll take one pill, and it will target and kill any remaining cancer cells that the surgery didn’t get. Aren’t you glad you had your thyroid out now?”

I think the sanctimonious angel moved over to his shoulder for that one.

As I get ready for bed, having done nothing but watch mindless TV and ponder my situation, I consider the difference between voluntarily staying in my room for a week and being forced to. I look at the bloody stitches crossing my throat just where someone would gesticulate getting their throat slit and think that under other circumstances I might have enjoyed a few days to myself.

Day Three

I wake in familiar surroundings. I am in my bed, I am wearing my favorite pink nightgown with Parisian depictions, and my Pomeranians, Pebbles and Bam-Bam, are barking outside on the patio. But I am alone. I am not the same. My neck still hurts. My thyroid is gone.

I think about the sanctimonious angel and devil that divide me and wonder if my cancer was a direct result of my rebellion from the gospel. I had heard of this kind of retribution before. I remember sitting in church during fast and testimony meeting and hearing the testimony of a brother who said that a group of teenagers had gone out to lunch after church and been killed. He said they died because they broke the Sabbath. It was against church rules to spend money on Sunday. No going to the store or to a restaurant. Ideally you were home with family studying the scriptures.

I no longer follow those rules. Sunday is just another Saturday, but not quite as ideal: that voice in my head keeps remembering that the next day is Monday. How many times have I broken the Sabbath? I don't go to church anymore, and I no longer follow the Word of Wisdom. The Word of Wisdom is an important concept in the Mormon religion, intended to keep your body clean: no smoking, no drinking, no coffee, no tea.

"That inasmuch as any man drinketh wine or strong drink among you, behold it is not good, neither meet in the sight of your Father, only in assembling yourselves together to offer up

your sacraments before him. And, again, strong drinks are not for the belly, but for the washing of your bodies.” (Doctrine & Covenant, Section 89, Verses 5-6).

I was never really tempted by strong drinks. I’ve tried several throughout the years. It’s like I want to like it. I want to go wine tasting in the Napa Valley, but I remain like a child who tries alcohol for the first time and spits it out. Why do people drink? It tastes awful.

“And again, tobacco is not for the body, neither for the belly, and is not good for man, but is an herb for bruises and all sick cattle, to be used with judgment and skill.” (Doctrine & Covenant, Section 89, Verse 8).

I didn’t have a problem with the no smoking part either, although I did give in to peer pressure once and had a few puffs, but I couldn’t understand the appeal. The only reason I could see to smoke was maybe if you lived up north and you wanted to stay warm, but we were in Florida, and it was already hot enough.

“And again, hot drinks are not for the body or belly.” (Doctrine & Covenant, Section 89, Verse 9).

No hot drinks was interpreted by church leaders as no caffeine, so no Coke or Pepsi, not even orange Crush or Dr. Pepper was allowed. I was usually left with Sprite or 7-up. The plain ones. No pizazz.

It is hardly surprising that this is one of the things I relished when I left the church. I really savor having a Coke now, and my Keurig is the first person I talk to in the morning.

There's another layer of protection that I no longer have. I no longer wear the special clothing that protects you. They are seemingly thin and flimsy white garments that are blessed. They are worn under your regular clothes so as not to be seen. They are private, sacred. Could they have protected me from thyroid cancer?

Once, a sister from Arizona, told me that there was a sister in her ward who was pregnant, and she had been kidnapped because the kidnapper (a woman as I remember) wanted her baby. The sister who was kidnapped believed because she was wearing her sacred garments no harm would come to her or her baby. She believed God would protect her. But the kidnapper cut her baby from her stomach and the sister died. I guess the moral of the story is not to have blind faith. That you have to fight your battles and not lean entirely on someone else.

I went to my walk-in closet and found my stockpile of sacred clothing. I had put them on a shelf behind my hanging clothes, hidden out of sight for years. I knew I had to remove the religious signs before I could throw them out. Now seemed like a good time. I took some scissors and removed the small marks. They are thin little pieces that flutter when I drop one. I put them in my pocket to take to the trash can, and as I did I thought of Jimmy Stewart finding Zuzu's petals at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

I should use my phone to reach out to someone, to have them tell me it's going to be okay, that no this isn't God's retribution, but instead I use it to Google everything about my illness, reading personal accounts, and hearing worst case scenarios.

Radioactive Iodine (more specifically 100.2 mCi of iodine-131) runs through my body. According to many websites I found, it increases the chances of me getting other cancers like leukemia, breast cancer, and stomach cancer. I imagine its descent down my esophagus into my stomach and through my intestines. Eventually departing, but not leaving. It will seek out any remaining thyroid cells and destroy them. I will be radioactive for up to three months, still capable of setting off radiation monitors at border crossings and airports.

After being given the diagnosis, I had to go for a consultation with an oncology doctor, and then the next stop had been the Oncology Department at the hospital for treatment. This was something I had to do alone because of the radiation. I couldn't ask someone to come with me even if I wanted to. This time I wanted someone to be with me. I felt the rebellion like a teenager who is told they can't see that boy again. I wanted to sneak out my bedroom window in the middle of the night.

The signs in the parking lot proclaimed that these spots were for cancer patients only. I felt singled out. Labeled. Like I had a star on my head, or maybe an "x" that everyone could see, that said "just shoot me now." It was nice to get a close spot, but at what price?

Once inside, the routine helped: go to the front desk, tell them of your appointment, give them your license and insurance card, and get the paperwork. The paperwork was a good distraction. It is supposed to be mindless, but I needed my full concentration. I returned the paperwork to the receptionist. She was nice, maybe too nice. I felt what I imagined pity from her. She was on the opposite side. Not only the partitioned wall and glass separated us. She gave me my cards back, and I returned to my seat, left to gaze at the others in the waiting room.

I saw a star on everyone else who was waiting with me. I imagined their life, their diagnosis, their prognosis, their road ahead. I picked up a magazine and read the article, “You Have Cancer, What Do You Do Now?”

When it was my turn, the doctor of nuclear medicine brought in a lead-lined metal canister and inside it was a plastic container and inside of that was an innocuous looking blue capsule.

“Don’t touch the pill, just use the container to toss it back in your throat. Try not to let it get stuck in your throat,” the doctor said.

Now I knew we were all getting exposed, so I couldn’t wait or deliberate. This was my course of action—becoming radioactive to kill cancer.

I have never been a good pill taker. Most pills I cut in half. If it was bigger than an Advil, I’d usually cut it. I’d even opt out for liquid medicine if possible. I often choked and needed several attempts before being successful. But I was resolute.

I did it quickly. One attempt and I don’t think it touched my throat, at least not too much.

“Now, you took your nausea pill before you came, right?” the doctor asked.

“Yes.”

“Good, because if you throw up, then we’ll have to call the hazmat team.” He smiled.

Oh good. I was that dangerous? What else was it doing to me besides killing the cancer?

Afterwards, the doctor had waived a wand over me to make sure I was radioactive. It made staticky noise just like in the movies.

I drove myself home, trying to avoid the red lights, looking at the cars next to me, hoping I didn't see any children. It was worse for kids.

The doctor said I should quarantine myself in my house. Going to a hotel was worse: Unsuspecting people right on the other side of the wall. Luckily, our house is a split plan. I am in the master bedroom on one end of the house while my husband, daughter, and puppies are on the other end. I still worry about them, but our house is pretty large. I remember when we first moved in and the doorbell rang while I was in the master bathroom. I couldn't even hear it.

A week alone. Solitary confinement. It sounded intimidating.

Before bed, I look in the mirror trying to see if the effects of hypothyroidism are noticeable. Do I have dry skin, a puffy face, a swollen tongue? I think I look the same. I pull at my skin, turn my face slightly to view each side. How well do you know your face? Is a slight change noticeable?

Day Four

I make my way to the bathroom and pee, staring down at what I have produced. It isn't green. It isn't glowing. I flush the toilet twice. The doctor told me it was safer to flush twice. I'll also have to wash my clothes and sheets two times when the week is over. I imagine what it

will be like. I will be cautious. At first, I will wave at my daughter from afar, but gradually I will progress to hugging her again.

I worry about the metallic taste in my mouth as I examine my stitches in the mirrored-closet doors. A bloody scab has formed, and I know that means I will have a scar. Dr. Rosado was supposed to be the best. I guess he's not that good.

There aren't any noises in the house. Guillermo's at work, and our daughter is at school. Pebbles and Bam-Bam are in their kennel. I turn on the TV needing the sound of voices.

I remember as a teenager being home alone and falling asleep with the TV on, thinking nothing could happen to me as long as they were there with me watching. *Knight Rider* would save me, or maybe the *A-Team*. I still got some comfort from the drone of voices.

I nod off and come to several times throughout the day. The loss of my thyroid has caused me to be extremely tired. I need hormones.

Day Five

It is four o'clock in the morning. I'm awakened by the sound of an airplane overhead. It is unusually close and thunderous. What if it is terrorists releasing a deadly gas? Or bombing the city? What will I do? I wait for an explosion. I wait to see if it returns. Not this time. It was just a plane. But what will I do if that happens?

A few weeks ago I was self-sufficient. The reality is that I am now dependent on thyroid medicine for the rest of my life. I don't think anyone can really understand that feeling unless it's happened to them. If I don't have this medicine I will die—no ifs, ands, or buts. Right, that shouldn't be a problem, just go to Walgreens. But my anxiety-ridden brain is in apocalyptic mode. What would I do? I can try to stockpile some Synthroid, but pharmacies are careful with Synthroid because some people abuse it and use it for weight loss. What else can I do?

I Google it, “natural Synthroid,” and find that meat packers, like Armour, manufacture thyroid hormone by desiccating pig thyroids and grinding them into pills. In the old days this was the only option for hypothyroidism.

I picture myself as a survivor, trying to hunt down a wild pig and eat its thyroid, and immediately I remember *The Lord of the Flies* from high school. I remember them hunting a pig. I remember them killing each other. I remember the awful feeling it gave me.

First, I would need courage, something I lack, but how would it change me? I, who cry watching Hallmark commercials.

I spend the day constructing a plan of attack. Finding pictures of thyroids on the internet. Knowing the exact location where my knife needs to strike. Looking for instructions on how to dry meat. Looking for ways to snare an animal.

Day Six

I wake remembering my plan, and now I am a bit sheepish. My imagination has run away with me. I feel like a prisoner. The slats on the blinds have become bars, and I don't even attempt to open them. This is another layer of protection to save everyone from me. I know I am dangerous to others right now, but am I dangerous to myself, too? Should I at least open the blinds to let in some light?

In 1890, The U.S. Supreme Court found that solitary confinement “produced reduced mental and physical capabilities,” and according to the *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry*, solitary confinement can “cause an array of mental disorders, as well as provoke an already existing mental disorder in a prisoner, causing more trauma and symptoms.”

This whole no people thing is starting to get to me. Yes, I have a cell phone. A marvelous invention. I can “reach out and touch someone,” but I'm denied human touch. The touch that a baby must have in order to survive. What about adults? How long can I go without human touch?

Solitary confinement was introduced into the prison system as a form of punishment, but I didn't do anything wrong. It is used when a prisoner is considered dangerous to themselves or others. Yes, I'm dangerous to others, but not willfully. Then again, maybe I did do something wrong. I didn't follow The Word of Wisdom.

“And all saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments, shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones; And shall find

wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures; And shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint. And I, the Lord, give unto them a promise, that the destroying angel shall pass by them, as the children of Israel, and not slay them. Amen.”
(Doctrine & Covenants, Section 89, Verses 18-21).

The sacred pieces of cloth are gone, and I wonder if one day I will be like Jimmy Stewart grasping in his pocket for Zuzu’s petals, wanting to go back to things the way they were.

Day Seven

This is the last day. My eyes have bugged out. I wonder if they will go back to normal. I wonder if I will ever feel normal again. Thyroid cancer most often travels to the lungs and bones. I will have to have a full body PET scan to see if the cancer has traveled and to see if there are any cancer cells left in my thyroid area. Laying perfectly still in that small enclosed space I’ll think about being comfortable in my own skin. I won’t get claustrophobia. I’ll welcome breathing in the same air I have just exhaled. There is something soothing in relying on myself, sustaining myself.

The sanctimonious angel leaves me for good, but hopefully so does the little devil. I find that I often think in religious terms. Angels and devils are natural characters for me, yet I’ve decided not to give up on coffee, to believe what I believe no matter what the consequences.

When I go back to work, I'll find my Chicken Little doll and gave her an honorary place on my desk, like a fat picture on the fridge, to remind me that even when the sky is falling, I can hold it up.

I remember a girl in high school whom everyone made fun of because of her bugged-out eyes. They called her frog face. It seems every flaw I've ever noticed on someone else has eventually become one of my own. A spin on the whole Dorian Gray idea.

FALLING IN LOVE

Lawn chairs sprawled—legs open inviting someone to sit. Squeaking with weight, scraping across concrete to be closer to one another. *Punch!* Red and potent, wanting to be inside us. Lingering, touching—cool on the way down. The ice sparkling and whispering, *Drink Me*.

Salsa, Merengue, *El Baile de la Escoba*: The Broom Dance. It pounds and jumps in little notes, Will *u be mine?* And long harsh notes, *Be with me—Dance!*

Azucar! Celia laughs as we move, spin, and shake like Slinkies covered in Jello, bodies hard and soft at the same time. *Swish, swish*—sand scatters. The broom falls. Like musical chairs everyone rushes, but it is my turn with the broom. *La escoba, mi amor*. No rhythm, no flashing eyes, no secret smile.

I make believe—embracing the broom, dancing, laughing. The beat quickens. I drop the broom. I look—there is no one. Surprise! I am grabbed from behind. It is him. We forget how to dance. The punch is weak—so very weak. *Swish, swish*.

HOW COULD I NOT HAVE HEARD THE TRAIN?

Crusty lashes open to an obscured room, and I marvel at the absence of noise or perhaps of anything. The silence greets me not like an old friend, but a new acquaintance tentatively reaching out its hand. I lean toward the center of my queen-sized bed almost surprised to feel the black-haired arm. Like a blind person I reach for his face my thumb brushing the lids, the fleshy lips. The same lips that laughed with the waitress at dinner now silently speak to me, his body hollowing a crater in the mattress, separating us.

I peer over the edge of the bed to see our daughter, but all is shadow. Threading my hair behind my ear I listen, but the only sound I hear is my own breathing, so I hold my breath as if a guest at an underwater tea party and her breathing purrs in the room like humidifier mist.

In the distance a train whistles two chords on an organ, faint, yet fused. I have never heard that sound before. Smiling in the dark, I walk to the bathroom and don't bother turning on the light.

NOSTALGIA

I went home in my mind today, back to the crunchy brown grass, to the hullabaloo of a family the I'm not talking to so and so, the you should have called, the whys and why nots a constant metronome, and yet I still felt a longing, an ache for something, for that moment when it doesn't matter that my husband doesn't kiss me anymore, or that my daughter no longer idolizes me, for that moment when it only matters that I can see myself the way I used to be, the way I still feel, like a little girl with my whole life ahead of me.

BEWITCHED

I dreamed of being Samantha from *Bewitched*, wiggling my nose and snapping my fingers to travel great distances. It would have come in handy that winter when we were dating, going to see you every weekend on the NJ transit, waiting together at Grand Central for the connecting subway. You leaned against the platform post and wrapped me inside your green trench coat, entwined like a braid with only two strings, our scarves catching our breath, springing it back to warm our skin.

And now, 20 years later, I don't need a magic nose or even a train. You're right there on the other side of the bed, all I have to do is reach. Our breath mingles in the air, but somehow the distance is too great, so I change position and we sleep back to back.

MY DREAM ABOUT BEING BEAUTIFUL

Making a man's head turn, his jaw hang open, that's your goal girl, knowing he needs you more than you need him, so when he does go out drinking and whatever you can still look in the mirror and know you're beautiful.

It didn't do any good. No matter how beautiful you think you are, it doesn't help. It didn't help. If a hundred men told you how beautiful you were, it wouldn't matter. Somehow she was better to the one man that mattered. Even though everyone says you are prettier, maybe she had better legs, a better stomach, a better smile. Somehow she was better. You may never know. You will always wonder. How?

REFUSE

Teenage orphan boys. Gnats swarming around freshly glossed lips. The heel on the loaf of bread. The crumbs that stick to your feet. Last year's little black dress. Tickets to the box office flop. Last week's leftovers. The weed's encircling this year's healthy crop. A warm, flat beer. Stale potato chips. The football game on nineteen inches instead of seventy. What I was to you.

I won't allow your fantasy to be my reality, the illusion that HD is better, that you have to have more than just one chip, that fresh is better than aged, that weeds are ugly, (they're just not what you want at the time).

Remember last week's leftovers are manna to the neighbor who's never tasted them, and the crumbs that stick to his feet simply reassure him that he is full.

I refuse.

THE WHOLE TRUTH, SO HELP ME GOD

“I destroyed our family,” my husband said, handing his wedding ring to me.

“I know,” I said.

“Will you do me a favor?” he said looking at my wedding ring on my finger.

“What?” I said, knowing the answer.

“I put the ring on your finger twenty-four years ago. Will you let me take it off?” he asked.

I didn't want to ask for his ring back, but our rings were my mom and dad's rings from when they were married, so I had to have his back. My dad died when I was six years old, and my mom got remarried so she didn't wear the ring anymore. When it was time for me to be married my mom asked if we wanted their rings. I thought it would be special to have them. I thought that their good marriage would bring us luck. In a way my dad would live on. I thought my husband was like him. They were both from another country. My husband had to get the ring sized down two sizes.

Imagine a Spanish Danny Zuko from the movie *Grease*, and you'll get a picture of the man I married. Black greased-back hair, black leather jacket, and even a little something in his walk, like he thought he was continually being watched and needed to impress.

It was September 1990, and he was the return missionary every Mormon girl dreamed of, a Christ-like man you could still have sex with. Being with a return missionary was my teenage

fantasy of *The Thornbirds* come to life. I'm still disappointed that Richard Chamberlain is gay, but my husband definitely wasn't. Full-blooded Latin, which of course I naively thought only meant he was born in a different country.

I was twenty-one years old, and in a way I guess I was Sandy from *Grease*, "lousy with virginity." Instead of poodle skirts I wore long, flowery dresses, and I had big 80s hair. I can still see Rizzo singing that song, making fun of Sandy who didn't smoke, drink, or have sex. Rizzo said that Sandy was "too pure to be pink." She couldn't be a Pink Lady (the cool clique), and neither could I. I was innocent like Sandy.

My friends Juana, Blanca, and I had driven from our homes in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to a campground in upstate New York for the weekend. It was a YAC, Young Adult Conference, designed to have Mormon young adults mingle and thus continue the virtuous progeny.

Camp Liahona had big, airy wooden cabins. Swan boats and canoes on a lake, but that was twenty-five years ago, so perhaps I've romanticized it a bit.

The first night there was a dance. The main things to know about a Mormon dance are that only the traditional waltz handgrips are allowed, and The Bible is the customary measurement of chastity, or even better the all-in-one trifecta: The Book of Mormon, The Doctrine & Covenants (D&C), and The Pearl of Great Price. That way it is thicker. The only memorable thing about the dance was that a Brazilian guy, someone I knew only marginally, tried to put his tongue down my throat. I don't even remember his name.

The next morning was the first time I saw my husband-to-be, and he somehow looked more like Kenicki, the sidekick, than Danny, the hero. He had ketchup on his scrambled eggs, and although I had liked that as a little girl, it seemed repulsive then. He was wearing his famed leather jacket, shorts, and sunglasses. He sat at the same picnic-style table that we did, but I barely glanced at him.

It is hard to believe, even now, that the very next day he totally engulfed me. How can the same person be invisible and the next day be divine? It was only an hour before we were supposed to be leaving for home, and I hadn't seen him since the ketchup and egg non-incident the day before. I was waiting in the cafeteria-style lunch line which snaked along beside his table when I noticed him. It must have been he who noticed me first because he was staring at me. His eyes were alive. He wouldn't stop staring, and I was embarrassed. One of his friends at his table asked Blanca if we wanted to sit with them, and she said yes. I was mortified.

Grease was the antithesis of the wholesome movies we were supposed to watch. Growing up in the church, we were not allowed to watch TV on Sundays, but they made an exception for the Disney movie that would come on every Sunday night. This was before Disney made movies like *Splash* that showed Daryl Hannah's butt.

I went to see *Grease* at the movie theater when it first came out. It was 1978, and I was nine years old. There was a buzz in the air because the movie was so risqué. I don't remember seeing the scene where the T-Birds mooned the camera—most likely my eyes had been shielded

by an adult's sweaty palm—but I do remember the excitement over doing something I wasn't supposed to do.

The year before, when I was eight, I had been baptized. In the Mormon faith, you are blessed shortly after birth, but you aren't baptized until you turn eight. I was one of the first ones to be baptized in the new indoor baptismal font. What was most important was that all of your body parts had to be immersed, no allowances for hands sticking up, even your hair had to be totally immersed. If that happened you would have to redo it again and again, just like on a movie set. It had to be perfect. I had to have two takes. My long brown hair had snuck up to the surface.

From the day of my baptism forward my sins were accumulating. When I was baptized I became sin free. The time that I had played doctor with the boy down the street, the time I had told my father I didn't have to listen to him, the time I lied about being sick so I wouldn't have to go to church, all had been forgiven. I was starting fresh. But now I had ruined it with a sinful movie that my nonreligious aunt had taken me to. I hoped my mom wouldn't find out.

I was even more mortified when we returned with our food-laden trays, and the whole table miraculously seemed full except for a seat next to him. Was it divine intervention? I would later learn that he had had everyone move so that I would sit next to him.

He was charming, explaining how he had just returned from a mission to Sacramento, California, the week before. He carried his scriptures engraved with his name, and he explained

how he had converted more people than any other missionary in his mission. It was quite impressive to my twenty-one year old self.

Missionaries were God-like to young women in the church. They were always dressed in a suit and tie, they were respectful and mature, not like the boys who didn't go on a mission (who were more likely than not losers, or at least slackers). The slackers didn't have that spiritual relationship with God which would pull a family through a catastrophe, no direct link to a higher power, so there was very little need to deliberate over the question of missionary or non-missionary: missionary was the golden ticket, and at the time I thought I just might have found mine.

We talked about his name, which was unusual. We also talked about my name, which is Swedish, and which he thought was unusual.

"My name is Guillermo," he said rolling his Rs. His accent was quite beautiful, like a French accent I thought.

"Can you say it again?" I asked.

"Gui-ger-mo," he slowly enunciated.

"Gui-ger-mo?" I asked.

"No, Gui-ger-mo," he said.

"That's what I said."

"No, Gui-ger-mo," he said it even more slowly.

"Oh, it has a J sound in it?" I asked.

"Yes."

“But there’s no J in it?”

“Right.”

When I think back on this moment, I remember him boasting throughout the years at how the Spanish language is so easy because there is only one sound for each letter and everything is spelled phonetically. “Not like English,” he would say. “We didn’t even have spelling tests growing up. There was no point.” I never asked him to explain the J sound in his name though.

He told me he was from Ecuador, and I confidently related that Quito was the capital. Learning my capitals for all the states in the U.S., and all the countries in the world was something I prided myself on. I also learned all the U.S. Presidents in order. We talked about Ecuador, and we talked about Sweden, which in turn brought up the topic of our fathers.

“I’m half Swedish. My dad was from Sweden, but he died when I was six,” I said.

“My dad died when I was twelve,” he said.

“So you remember him?” I asked.

“Yes, don’t you?”

“No, not really. Not very much at least. I’m not sure if my memories are true memories, or just what I remember being told.” I said.

The loss of our fathers is one thing that brought us together. I remember always being jealous though, that he had double the amount of time with his than I had with mine.

We talked about the church, and he told me how great it felt to bring someone into the church for the first time.

“There’s no feeling like it. The feeling that they now have the true religion,” he said.

I smiled up at him, the light dancing in his eyes like a cave full of stars.

We talked until it was time to go. After all, we had met only one hour before the conference was supposed to be over. The meal was our last. It was time to depart.

After lunch, he walked me to my cabin, we exchanged phone numbers, and he kissed my cheek goodbye. As soon as he left, I commenced dancing and twirling around the room with excitement. Juana and Blanca came in and asked me what had happened, and I exclaimed, “He kissed me!”

I’d always thought that when the bishop and other church leaders had said, “When you know the truth, you will be judged harder in heaven,” that they were talking about getting baptized. It wasn’t until years later that I learned I was wrong. The truth and full judgment didn’t come with baptism (even though my sins were accumulating): the truth came when you got your endowments in the temple, which meant that you gained a higher understanding of the gospel and accepted all the covenants of the church.

I got my endowments when I married my husband in the temple. I learned my name in heaven that my husband would use to find me in heaven. I learned the secret handshake, and I wore the sacred clothing. From then on I knew the truth and would be judged accordingly.

Babies are not judged. If a child dies before age eight, then they go to heaven automatically. Then when you are baptized at eight, your sins start accumulating, and you are judged based on those. Full knowledge is gained when you get your endowments in the temple and with it comes full judgment. You get your endowments when you get married or become a

missionary. My husband already had full knowledge when we were married, but I didn't understand this until after I was married, until it was too late. If I had known, then what? Would I have not gotten married just so I wouldn't risk damnation? I wish I had been a Pygmy in Australia who had never heard of our God, and so would never risk damnation. If you knew nothing then you were saved. This is one of the main reasons I didn't raise our daughter in the church.

By the time I got back from Camp Liahona to my house in Pennsylvania, there was a message on my answering machine from him. I was flattered and impressed that he wasn't like a typical guy that had to wait a number of days to show that he wasn't too interested in you. This was a guy who didn't care what people thought. He went after what he wanted. I thought I could like that.

We carried on a long distance romance, with him in New York and me in Pennsylvania. These were the days when you were charged for long distance phone calls, even if you called the city right next door. Our phone bills were a testament to our love. He lived in New York City, which only added to his attraction for me since I had dreamed of sophisticated city life for years. I remember taking the Septa and New Jersey Transit trains on cold winter weekends to visit him, and then taking the subway from Penn Station to his home in Astoria, Queens. While we waited for the subway, he would wrap me in his arms, pulling his trench coat around us. I felt so safe and protected.

Our romance was a whirlwind affair lasting eight months from meeting to marriage. The next twenty-four years went much slower: We had one daughter, two miscarriages, three dogs, two apartments, one townhouse, one house, one hysterectomy, one bout with thyroid cancer, and one affair. That was the day I asked him for his ring back, the day that I let him remove my ring. The ring that had stayed on my finger while washing dishes and doing yard work, the ring that through the years had been so loose that it almost fell off and so tight that my finger hurt.

“I thought I didn’t love you anymore,” he said.

“That doesn’t make it okay,” I said.

“I never touched her,” he said.

“But you lied to me, repeatedly. You told me you were just friends, but you told her you loved her.”

From what I can gather, he had an emotional affair. He fell in love with his secretary who was seventeen years younger than he was and who was also married. He told her he would support her and raise her three young children. She sent him compromising pictures. They stayed up until four o’clock in the morning talking when they had to get up at six. He didn’t touch her, but I think I would have preferred if he had just had sex with her. Then he could be totally guilty, instead of only partially. Then I could really condemn him.

Just five years earlier in 2010, I was bleeding out and had to have an emergency dilation and curettage (D&C) and a blood transfusion. My ob-gyn said that it looked like I had cancer, and if she couldn’t stop the bleeding then they would have to wheel me across the street to

Orlando Regional Medical Center and cauterize my uterine artery. I ended up having a hysterectomy. Afterwards, my husband and I had the talk.

“What will you do if I die?” I asked.

“I’ll just be alone,” he said.

“You won’t get remarried?” I asked.

“No.”

“But won’t you be lonely?”

“I’ll just get a blow up doll and put your picture on her,” he chuckled.

“That sounds really weird, but I like it.” I laughed.

I don’t know what happened from that day forward. What had changed that made him renounce me. What made him want someone else? That changed him into someone who lied to me continuously.

“I was tired of being the nice guy,” he said.

I wonder if the last twenty-four years had been an act, and maybe he was the bad boy all along, maybe he was never Danny, or even Kenicki, maybe he was Crater face the Scorpions’ leader.

I’m risking damnation right now, as I write this story. My husband told me that the covenants we made in the temple were sacred and not to be shared. The smallest detail about what happens in the temple can be grounds for excommunication. I’m risking it all now, but I’ve learned to grow up, to believe in what is staring me in the face, not some invisible idea of a God

or a hidden idea of a man. I want the whole truth as the church and my husband never gave it to me.

I feel like Sandy at the end of *Grease* now, no longer innocent, but enticing in tight black pants and red stilettos with wild hair. This is how Sandy got the guy, but for me it is the way I feel now that I lost the guy. I toss my self-imposed constraints aside and walk straight into the night.

NAKED

I sleep with my feet outside the covers. They nestle each other, gently twiddling like large bulbous thumbs seeking the night, pioneers of my body. This is my rebellion. Yet some nights I'm cold, and they sidle their way back in—but I thrust them out again, remembering the night I woke sweaty and tangled under the covers kicking and fighting to get out, seeing myself old and withered like a fruit that rotted before it was ever ripe. I'm learning to welcome the tormenting brush of the cold air on my naked skin.

HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN?

languishing pink globes bobbing tepid water lapping my rough mass sucked smoothed eroded
until I am but sediment when the plug is pulled parts escaping the globes deflated the water gone
yet single drops slide like wind chime ribbons twirling down my pale legs and I pause waiting
to see if they will become woozy and leap or if they will linger and burst open saturating me
with their liveliness

PURGATORY REEXAMINED

I'm floating, bobbing around wherever the current takes me. The quicksand is still here, but somehow it seems thinner, more like the sea. I didn't hold my breath. I've breathed in everything. My dad's death, my miscarriage, my husband's adultery, my cancer. Seaweed slithers over my foot, and I don't alter my stance. I've learned to exhale knowing I won't sink to the bottom. That maybe I don't have to make it to the other side. Floating is enough.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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