Cat Shit in the Attic:

A Memoir

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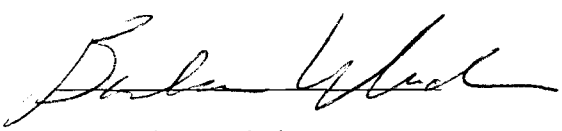

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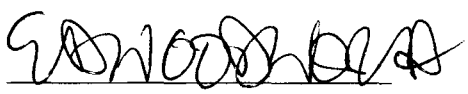

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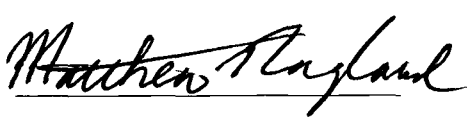

Dr. Matthew Ragland
Associate Provost

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the cat shit and all those who deal with it. May you always be escorted from funerals for laughing too hard at the wrong moments.

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Part I: Building the Attic to Shit in

After a full day of listening to my brother and I lose interest in the toys we brought for the trip and turn to torturing each other for entertainment, my father finally screamed, "Not one *fucking* exit further!" and veered into the oldest, least updated town in Virginia. I, having been strapped into a car seat for seven or eight hours, was anxious to get out of the vehicle and out of my brother's range of unencumbered taunting. Since no company had yet managed to pass legislation requiring portable prison chairs for eight-year-olds, Daniel had had seven hundred maddening miles of moving freely and shooting spitballs behind the blind spot of my mother's headrest.

Dad's first attempt to silence us (bribery, with the promise of fifteen dollars upon completion of fifteen minutes of silence) and his failure to pay up (claiming he had said "doll hairs," not "dollars") ensured that no amount of bribery or trickery could silence us. Mom had half-heartedly separated us with a squashed box that inexplicably "no longer fit in the trailer" after about a hundred miles, so Dad's breaking point came as a surprise to no one. Driving from Massachusetts to Alabama, especially when in possession of an entire family's belongings, took a certain strength of will.

We pulled into the first hotel on the road, and although I was four and had only seen a few accidental minutes of one horror movie, the words, "Never found the body" entered my head. Built with all the finest intentions of 1970s flair, this decaying once-yellow-but-now-bird-crap-colored establishment was the picture of urban decay. The parking lot, lit by tilting, loudly buzzing streetlights, had been sun-bleached a depressing light gray. A thick forest edged the property in a sinister fashion, as if the woods might at any moment take back the land and all living beings foolish enough to stand near it.

My father went into the tiny office while Mom released us children to run the circumference of the car and repeatedly scream the motto she had been unfortunate enough to exclaim earlier: "I can't feel my legs!"

She ignored us, instead extracting the four overnight bags she had assembled for the days of our trip and flopping our most worn clothes over the boxes crammed in the car in order to make our possessions look junky, cheap, and "less worthy of being stolen." It worked in asadly effective manner.

Dad reappeared with a dull brass key and shoved it into my mother's hand so he could go find the redneck bar that the office manager had recommended. Being too tired to argue, she silently led us to our double-bedded ground floor quarters. Daniel and I zipped into the room and destroyed its cleanliness with a speed and skill that would have rivaled professional Vikings before Mom enticed us with the idea of vending machines.

The traumatic stress of having been teased all day by a sibling with much more freedom of motion left me grouchy and picky and irritable. Thus it was when we approached the ancient machine pocked with buttons featuring faded pictures of drinks. Daniel stuffed in his coins and slapped a button too tall for me to see properly. The machine clanged metallically and spat out a small aluminum beverage—orange juice, the beautiful sunshine state beverage.

Aided by the lifting hands of my mother, I, too, slipped money into the machine and pressed the button smudged by Daniel's fingers. *Clang*, *clang*, *clang*, and the machine spat out another aluminum can wreathed not in the reassuring citrus of orange but the sickly sweet gush of purple: *grape juice*.

That machine might as well have vended me a can of liquid arsenic; the revolting purple hummingbird water sloshed in the can sinisterly, the edible version of villainous violin music. The devil lived in that tin—the purple, fruit-squashed devil who wanted nothing more than to crash down my throat, choking the life and breath out of my tiny lungs until all my bodily oxygen was replaced with riboflavins that would, after a curing period, ferment me into a human-sized puddle of wine that monsters would surely drink and then photosynthesize into more horrible, life-sucking grape juice—

"Just drink it, please," said Mom, pushily encouraging my flaccid hand to grip the container. I swatted her away violently, banishing the drink as priests cast out evil spirits.

"By the power of Christ, be gone from my sight and soul, thing of evil!" I cried, brandishing my crucifix and gesticulating wildly. Well, no I didn't, but the motions were in my heart and the words arrived only twenty-two years too late.

Out of change and patience, Mom pushed Daniel and I back toward our room. I dragged my feet against grass-bursting cement, leaving two thin, dirty trails of dejectedness in my wake, like a sentient snail crawling back to a hotel room where its mother will force it to eat salt. My brother, a happy, scuttling hermit crab, skittered along with his can of—seaweed? Sand fleas? What's a nutritious and enjoyable snack for a hermit crab? Chunks of decaying driftwood? Rotting albacore tuna? Damn it! He was gleeful while I was glum, the end.

In the badly aged suite, Mom set out dinner on the plasticky bed sheet. She placed the grape juice by my food, which meant a glaring contest between the drink and me. Handing over a hunk of some of the only foods that picky four-year-old me ate—such as peeled cucumbers, cauliflower, white bread, and sunflower seeds—Mom sat, too, and

munched on her sandwich. Daniel also ate a sandwich, keeping his food close to his chest, a habit that the pilfering hands of public school lunchrooms had bred in him. Since starting school in Massachusetts, Daniel always looked a little mean and desperate when he ate, his eyes darting around as if daring someone to snatch a fry. Sometimes I did snatch a fry, and the consequences were severe.

I stayed to my own plate this night, too hell-bent on incinerating that grape juice with the power of my mind to bother with my brother's dinner. Though I was unaware of it, I must have been muttering dispossession spells in Latin or vexing my eyebrows furiously at the can. After a few minutes, I heard an irritated sigh from the other end of the bed. And then Daniel—the sibling who had been throwing wet garbage at me all day, the brother who had once trapped me in a baby swing to force-feed me creamed beets, the boy who tied ropes to my riding toys and yanked them when I reached top speed—stomped over to me, mumbled, "Have my orange juice," and switched our cans.

Surprise colored my face as he sat back down, popped open the grape juice, and threw it back; Daniel had *taught me* to hate the juice of grapes! He had used words like "sticky" and "bitter" and "Dimetapp," and I had witnessed him stealthy pouring glasses of it into the potted plants! In weekend picnic fights, the juice was a more feared a projectile than dog poop! We didn't hang out with the handicapped girl down the street not because she was handicapped but because she loved grapes! And she drooled on toys, but the grapes were the prime factor!

Seeing my flabbergasted expression, Daniel rolled his eyes. He crawled over, popped the tab on the orange juice, and thrust it into my hand. "Drink it," he said, retreating to his edge and jangling his empty can. "See, I'm not thirsty now."

And he refused to take back the juice.

Though the anecdote may seem unimportant, this is the first memory I have of generosity and kindness—the first memory I have of my brother volunteering for me at his expense. When I recalled it decades later, this is the event that makes me realize how much I owe him, for while grape juice may seem a trifle, it was the boogeyman of that hour, and he turned on the lights.

As the target child, Daniel took a lot for me, but my memory starts with grape juice.

When we finally arrived at our new address, the house floated on an ocean of dried, golden grass. In fact, I could only see the complete house from the road; the grass stretched so high over my head that, when surrounded by it, I could only see the cloudy blue ceiling and wheat-like walls swaying in the breeze. I hardly noticed the dark interior of the century-old farmhouse. No electric lights illuminated its rooms, no stairs allowed access to the second floor, and no friendly sounds of renovation were yet drifting through the halls. Dad showed me the ladder in the bathtub that allowed the previous occupants to climb into the unfinished upper floor; this unusual feature was, to my young mind, the only distinguishing interior mark that even somewhat matched the splendor of head-high grass.

After a night of insomniactically flipping through my favorite fairy tale book at Nanny and Pawpaw's home (Mom's parents), I spent our second Alabama day chasing adults through the grass. They entered the neglected yard with machetes, scythes, and

two-man crosscutting saws—perfectly normal grass lopping tools to me—and cut out labyrinthine paths. I chased them as most children chase butterflies, dancing and laughing in their wake, delighting in my uncles' accented swearing and my brother's pleas to use the "grim reaper knife." Great tuffs of grass fell to the sides, waiting to be collected with my southern family's motley rake collection and burned in a pile on a not-so-far-off scorching summer night.

When the waves of grass had finally been cut to the earth, the haunted-looking house finally made an impression on me. It stood extraordinarily larger with a buzz cut lawn. White burglar bars, each infused with the same small design in the middle, fit over every long downstairs window and the many-paned back door; these fixtures looked especially appropriate against the bubbly antique window glass. Dirty white stucco covered the house's exterior, not at all resembling the neatly fitted slats that decorated the New England homes I knew. The front door, itself dark and wooden, also had a fast-flapping screen that made friendly squeaks whenever opened by human aid or gusty winds. Two chimneys flanked the black roof, soldiers ever watchfully monitoring the road and sky.

A rusty fence separated the front and back yards, although so much flora hung from post to post that the fence was much more of a vertical garden. The front yard held four prominent features: a beautiful camellia tree that my brother would one day kill mysteriously; a run-down barn full of dirt, spiders, and rust-eaten tools; a curiously resilient, low-branched crabapple tree; and an enormous sugarberry tree with limbs half as wide as a car and twice as tall as our house. In the back, a cement-floored toolshed nearly abutted the back porch while a dilapidated greenhouse watched a few dozen feet

away. In between, someone had carved out a goldfish pond and circled it with large, flat stones. Flowers, vines, weeds, and trees thrived in and around the property, vestiges of the original owner's botany habit; a second humongous sugarberry tree grew a few feet beyond the back porch. A forest fifteen acres in size meandered off the backyard, growing sticky pines, long ferns, and hidden blackberries abundantly.

For children, the land would be ideal. For carpenters, the house would be an adventure. For the Youngs, the property would be an inescapable trap that set the stage for the collapse of our family.

We set up a base camp at my grandparents' house, a two-minute ride down the street, while my parents and uncles did the most prominent and necessary renovations—for example, installing electricity and converting full beer cans into empty ones.

Dad, who was anxious to escape his in-laws' house and take charge of his own domain, had us move in as soon as the doors were fixed on well enough that the larger wild animals couldn't wander in. Since this early habitation meant that I slept in what was once the dining room and Daniel the living room, we awoke whenever the earliest riser rose and assisted in the carpentry. The process was fascinatingly slow, perhaps because two young children were trying to help.

Ever desirous of finishing her interrupted college degree, Mom tried to go to school at night while constructing during the day. But the house demanded too much attention, and funds were low, and my father brought out a handful of further excuses to keep Mom and education apart.

Somehow, Dad was too busy to properly install insulation in the walls and sealant on the original wooden floor, too busy to cover the fistful of exposed wires at the top of the stairs, and too busy to close in the back porch so the washer and dryer weren't sitting out in all weathers. So we stayed cold in the winter and hot in the summer, learned how to dig splinters out of our bare feet, entertained ourselves by grabbing the red and blue wires together in different hands, and fought mosquitos for our socks. Having lived in our well-built Cape Cod home my entire life, this earthy, southern existence seemed a little too close to nature, but Mom called it "rustic" and Dad's apathy worked to make me apathetic, too.

Though distracted by our new surroundings and the renovations that made this new house less scary, Daniel and I still missed our snowy hometown. To combat our sadness, Mom resorted to bribery. Daniel bargained for video games, collectable action figures, baseball cards, shoes with lights dotting the sides—even a small cactus that occupied his western windowsill. I, however, was frustratingly lacking in consumerist desires.

All my toys already had names and personalities, and they didn't want to add a new member to the cast. In fact, one of the only times a new toy was added (aside from the toy orgasm of Christmas day) was when I came across some pathetic, injured, unwanted teddy bear whose stuffing dripped out a large tear in his side belly. These my mother would help me restore, teaching me how to crudely stitch without drawing too much blood from my fingers, and the injured toys would receive especially ordinary names so that they wouldn't feel different from the other toys: Amy, the single-winged

duck; Mike, the red-velvet bear with mismatching eyes; Julie, the ceramic white cat whose missing tail became substituted with Play-doh.

In this way, I was much more difficult to placate than my sibling. I wanted nothing, and therefore it was very difficult to distract me.

Until the kittens.

Within my uncle Terry's neighborhood lived a woman with a fluffy white angel of a cat. Its name might actually have been Angel, or something equally as obvious—Marshmallow or Q-tip or Mrs. Fluffers. This gorgeous specimen had, without her owner's consent, run off with another white kitty for a tryst behind the neighborhood and, as a result, gave birth to five cotton ball kittens. We encountered them while hunting out yard sales one bright Saturday morning, and I fell in love with the smallest, quietest handful of pure white love.

Mom did not want a cat in the house, knew my father would despise it, but this was the first thing that I had expressed any interest in acquiring. We tied a blue ribbon around my chosen cat's neck and promised to come back after picking up some supplies.

Food, litter box, cloth mice, collar with an annoying bell—we stocked up on feline provisions. I was a firecracker of excitement; our family had owned only one cat previously, and nobody had been fond of it due to its persistent and intentionally mean habit of pooping on the kitchen table. This cat, I knew, would be different. This cat was a white snowflake of perfection and innocence. We would develop a secret language, half-cat and half-English, and she would teach me how to turn into a cat so we could have nocturnal adventures. She and I were to be one entity. Hollywood would make a television show about us.

But I shall never know what effect that kitten would have had on my life, for when we returned, heavy with cat accouterments, to uncle Terry's neighboring house, the owner could only stare at us, perplexed by our return: she had already given all the kittens away.

"No, no," I countered, assuming she was teasing. "The one with the blue ribbon. The small one."

She shook her head, perhaps a little sadly, and closed the door in our faces.

Aggrieved, I walked back to our car, feeling empty and broken and irrevocably sad, and pushed a pile of googley-eyed springs out of my seat. They bounced to the floor, squeaking and chirruping cheerfully. I hadn't wanted a cat until the opportunity had meowed in front of me, and now—deflated, distraught, and in possession of an obscene amount of cat paraphernalia—I was deeply bitter in the way that only a child can be.

For the next week, the weather grew progressively worse, and I took to lying in bed all day, making Mom read me the saddest books available. When she finally grew weepy and irritated and refused to read me any more depressing literature, I struggled with the pages myself, rotating between an illustrated copy of *Black Beauty*, the end section of *Charlotte's Web*, and Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever*. The last I couldn't quite comprehend the sadness of, but I knew it made my mother cry, so empathetically staring at the pictures achieved my desired effect. Daniel, whose main joy in life was teasing me, gave up that vice almost entirely because I was too dispirited to shriek about him leaving me alone; he could have covered me in frogs and tied my hair to the bedpost, but all I would have said was, "Charlotte was *such* a good friend to Wilbur!"

The hurricane approaching central Alabama was set to hit us at about the same time that Mom decided that I was done moping and sniveling over a collar etched with the name "Mittens"—a name that, for whatever reason, I had intended for a *solid white* cat. I woke up at seven to a freakishly dark room and dragged myself downstairs to chew cereal sadly.

"No!" Mom said, snatching the Cheerios away from me and pushing a raincoat into my empty hands. "We're getting you some hash browns!"

I felt myself staring at the rubber as if I had never seen outerwear before. "No, thank you, I'm going to read—"

"No, you are not! We're getting you out of the house. Put on your shoes!"

I sighed and shuffled off to find my sneakers.

Dad grumbled down the stairs as I pushed my feet into old Sketchers. He paused beside me, suddenly realizing that he hadn't seen this particular child in six or seven days. Then he gave me a noncommittal sort of nod and went to the kitchen. I heard him ask, "Where's she going?" as if I were about to pick up the keys and take myself somewhere.

"We're picking up breakfast from Hardee's!" Mom's overly cheery voice floated past me, and I caught a flash of her tan arms as she rubbed Dad's neck. "Would you like anything? Coffee? A biscuit? I can make you something fresh when I get back, if you'd prefer."

His grimace at the prospect of southern food was perceptible, though I could only see the back of his head. Angrily, he barked, "Coffee," and stalked to the only bathroom in the whole house.

For a long moment, Mom stood in the kitchen, silent and still. The lack of noise was so loud that it caught my attention, and I glanced at my mother's tall, lean figure facing the door Dad had disappeared behind. A handful of seconds passed as that painted statue of a wife gazed toward her invisible spouse.

And then I gave an involuntary sigh of cat-longing, startling her out of deep thoughts.

Scooping up the keys, she flashed an encouraging smile as she ushered me toward the station wagon. She buckled her seatbelt happily, turned on the car happily, and drove happily, seemingly unaffected by the river of rain and potential hailstorms.

Although almost no other cars occupied the Hardee's parking lot, the crackly voice in the drive-up speaker still requested that we "please hold."

The rain had subsided in ferocity for a few minutes, although a miserable, endless drizzle poured onward. I stared forlornly out my window as Mom studied the breakfast menu.

"Would you like anything other than hash browns? A biscuit maybe?"

"*Mee-eeh!*"

Mom turned toward me, confused. "What? What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," I answered, equally puzzled.

The speaker box crackled and hissed with static, and an impatient female voice rattled off "WalcometaHardee'scannatakeyerorder?"

"*Meee-eeh!*"

"Ya'saidanumberfour?" the voice demanded. "What'tadrinkwiththat?"

"Hold on a minute, we don't want a number four," my mother said loudly. To me, she asked, "What is that sound?"

"It sounds like a squeaky gate closing," I said, pulled from my apathetic rut by curiosity. A primitive tin shed, housing the restaurant's garbage receptacle, stood nearby. It had a metal door shut tight, yet as I watched, we again heard, "*Meee-eehrrow!*"

"What'cha wanna drink with those number fours?" the voice asked in an annoyed tone. "Coffee or OJ?"

"I do not want any combos," Mom replied irritatedly. "We would like two orders of hash browns, a bacon, egg and cheese biscuit, and one order of biscuits and gravy."

"*Meee-eehrorw!*"

Mom, looking all around the car, asked, "Where is that coming from?"

I unbuckled my seat belt and began to crawl around the station wagon, wondering if we were encountering the world's squeakiest hail. When the sound came again, Mom looked out of her window at the bottom of the speaker box and cried out, "It's a kitten!"

Scrambling, I pushed my head out of Mom's window and saw a tiny, soaking gray-striped kitten peering up at my head and calling out to Hardee's patrons. Without a second thought, Mom popped open her door and plucked up the sopping kitty.

"Sevensixteensyourtotal, pleasepullround."

Mom put the kitten into my lap as we drove around, and I jubilantly let it parade dirt and pavement water all over my jeans. It continued to squeak, causing me to squeak answeringly in delight. I scratched its tiny head, promised to feed it as many of my hash browns as it desired, and began to rub it dry gently with my sleeves.

By the time we left the drive-through with a bag full of things we didn't order, there was no question that I would be keeping this animal. I named her Miss Kitty, in the vein of giving especially ordinary names to things that had troublesome pasts.

Since she was so small, several months passed before she was tall enough to mount the stairs and begin a lifelong habit of shitting in the unfinished "attic" area that sat on the second floor next to my and Daniel's shared room. Since my parents had a hundred renovation projects going on (and only Mom was working on them), several weeks passed before we discovered the source of the foul odor wafting through the skeletal two-by-four walls that separated hallway from attic. By the time we finally understood and located the cat feces, Miss Kitty had struck again among the jumble of storage boxes and accumulated junk.

Of course, Miss Kitty had her own litter box and could escape outside to poop on the fifteen acres of woodsy land that surrounded our home. Yet for no good reason, she took to squatting in hidden pockets of the attic and leaving pungent, unsolvable trails to torture her human family. Because our house was more yurt than modern American home, we could almost never be sure if the cat had in fact made it into the attic or if a large dead mouse (or smallish snake) was decomposing somewhere.

Dad, who disliked cats and (I realized after a decade) his family, left the house upon the first attical discovery and was to be seen less infrequently afterwards. He would come home at night to make sure Daniel felt inadequate about his male identity, such as by refusing to play ball with him because he threw "like a girl," and Mom about her physical appearance, such as by talking about all the women he had seen who were prettier than her, only to leave the next day for an undetermined location. Occasionally,

he stayed and played the guitar in the living room, and we crowded around, anxious for any attention we could get from him.

In Massachusetts, he used to pack us up in pillowcases and swing us in circles, or have us hunker down in deep snows as he built crude igloos around the arch of our backs. But now, settled into the deep south where bugs glowed in the evenings and food handlers fried Twinkies, we were lucky to sit next to his coppery-smelling amplifier as he sang songs about drug abuse and loose ladies.

Several years passed; we continued to live in an unfinished house, watching spiders nest in the exposed ceiling rafters and gathering around the wood-burning fireplace that was the only source of heat in our two-story shack. Sleeping in jackets during winter became second nature, and I developed a paralyzing fear that Santa Claus was waiting to ambush me in the shadows of the open-walled attic. This was a yearlong fear that reached its pinnacle at Christmas and stemmed from no discernible source.

Dad got a profitable job at a teleconferencing business that required a lot of travel. Mom, Daniel, and I didn't know how very profitable the job was until years later when Mom discovered that Dad had secretly started his own teleconferencing business, one of the innumerable secrets he would keep over the years; he was making disgusting amounts of money, but we were too ignorant at the time to be disgusted. The company's job was basically cutting out the need for travel by having linked phone meetings, but whatever—he traveled. When he was home, Mom worked feverously on making everything perfect, 1950s housewife style. When he was away, Mom still worked feverously on making

everything perfect. She never yelled when Daniel or I did something wrong, but a manic gleam came into her eyes as she worked to right it; I would have preferred the yelling. Our messy misdeeds pushed her into a vortex of concern and panic, as if having an unswept floor would mean the end of her marriage and family. Years after, I learned that's exactly what her poor, psychologically abused mind thought. As an adult, I understand that this logic is sensible to abused person, but as a child, I only saw Mom's constant speed, her obsessive cleaning, her quick admonishments, and her disastrous sobbing when things inevitably didn't work out.

The days got worse as Dad initiated two really impressive psychological torture tactics; first, he would decide to take Daniel and me out on some super cool adventure, such as bike riding around the capital or fossil hunting at Fort Toulouse. Once we were pumped up and running around with the energy of tiny, mad heathens, he would turn to Mom and tell her, "Oh, but *you* aren't going." Dumbstruck, Mom would ask why, and Dad would inevitably not respond. So desperate to maintain her marriage, she didn't fight. Instead, she developed a complex of thinking herself unworthy to attend fun events due to some impossible-to-decipher infractions. The second tactic (still in use today) was doing something morally wrong, leaving an obvious trail of evidence, and then lying about it. Mom could watch him sit down, snort a line of cocaine, light up a joint, and he would look her in the eyes and say, "I'm not doing drugs, Laurie." She would point to the remaining cocaine, the smoky ceiling, his glossy red eyes, and the Polaroid picture she had just taken of him simultaneously snorting coke and puffing weed. He would then say, "You're crazy, Laurie, there's something seriously wrong with you," and take another hit.

The ability to lie so well that your listener actual starts to question physical evidence is both inheritable and learnable; Daniel inherited it, and I, after a decade, learned it. At first, I didn't know I was learning this skill because that's how well it works. Victims have to see the ability demonstrated hundreds of times before having the epiphany: "Wait one minute, sir! I'm not the crazy person—*you are!* Reimburse me for that car I now know you stole!"

Ten years of watching my father's and brother's brazenfaced lying passed before I picked up the two rules of successful sanity-crushing falsehoods: (1) convince yourself of your lie and (2) stick to your lie *no matter what.* If the tiniest wrinkle of doubt creases your face—the minutest twitch of a lip, flick of an eye, flare of a nostril—you are boned. Your opponent will read the truth and the weakness in your spasmy eyebrows like a bloodhound nosing a rabbit hair. Moreover, even if someone paralyzes your whole face with Botox, the truth can shine out of your narking pupils. Since nobody, including a really boring superhero, has voluntary control over pupil dilation, one consciously spoken fib can balloon out those unfortunate circles and puncture the fake ground you're standing on. Believe what you say; you can't feel guilty for something you believe that you haven't done. Erase the truth from your mind and replace it with what you want to have happened. Once secure in your lie, you can counter attack, winning confusion and apologies.

As for sticking to your lie no matter what, you only have to stick to your lie no matter what. If you have completed the aforementioned step and convinced yourself that what you are saying really happened in this plane of reality, this second step becomes worlds easier. Freed from the fear of getting caught in your lie and the insecurity that

implicating yourself brings, no proof can trip you up. You did not have sexual relations with that woman. For example, Kent presents Laurie with the lie that he has given up smoking. Laurie walks outside to see Kent frenching Joe Camel. Laurie confronts Kent, snatching the still-burning cigarette from his mouth and holding it as evidence. Kent erases the truth from his mind and replaces it with bewilderment. I don't know, Laurie. How *did* that—what is it called, a cigarette?—get out here? The argument continues for ten minutes, during which time the cigarette burns out and Laurie unthinking drops it. Kent, during this time, has stuck to his lie despite the almost literal smoking gun in his wife's hands. When the cigarette hits the floor, Kent picks it up and remarks that Laurie's brother must have left it there. Laurie, confused, angry, frustrated, and emotionally charged, begins to doubt the certainty of her position because her husband is so calm. Liars are not calm. Liars fidget. Liars give themselves away. But Kent, believing that he honest-to-God was not smoking, becomes indignant at his wife's accusations and fires back his own: she doesn't trust him, never believes him, tries to make him the bad guy. Laurie, having been goaded into a wildly confusing state, begins to question her own sanity. Did she really see Kent with the cigarette in his mouth, or had he picked it up from the porch?

Mission completed. Kent has successfully driven his opponent insane.

However, when I was five, I knew none of this finely tuned method of fibbery, and so I thought that my mother and I shared the same delusions. Possibly, Mom strived harder for perfection in order to make up the mental troubles she thought she was causing her husband. Definitely, Daniel and I received stricter lifestyles more consistent with the perfect children of a perfect family.

Now, my L-shaped bedroom hid a third of itself, including a closet, from anyone standing in its entranceway. When my parents moved their room downstairs and Daniel moved into their old room, this geometric quality of my room both endeared and terrified me; I loved the unusual, and every other kid I knew had boring rectangular rooms. However, when my bed was stationed by the door, I could not see that mysterious third of the room—a portion big enough to hide any number of child-eating monsters. The consequences of this issue were that I plagued myself with a Nightmare Channel, a frequency on my dream television that featured nothing but action-packed, inevitably tragic terrors that made my body thrash and twist the bedcovers into a mound of chaos.

Unfortunately, a bed that appears to be the scene of a violent crime does not fit into a perfect and perfectly clean house; Mom had me make it every morning. Alone, this chore would have been normal and reasonable and fine; coupled with the insistence that all things—within drawers and without, visible and invisible—be blemishless, her demand began to take a toll on my psyche.

She realized this one morning when she came to wake me for school and found me asleep on top of my already made bed.

Gently, she woke me and asked, "Why are you sleeping on top of your covers?"

Unaware that my actions were outside the realm of normalcy, I answered simply: "This way they never get messed up."

By the deep furrows in my mother's forehead, I could tell my response troubled her.

"But," she said in an almost questioning tone, "it's okay to mess up your covers. You sleep in them."

"But I don't have to make them if they never get unmade," I said deliberately, as if speaking to a slow person. Her argument made as much sense to me as mine did to her.

As if emerging from a dream, Mom looked around my room at the parallel planes my furniture was aligned upon. She glanced at the uniformly sharpened pencils sitting in a row on my dustless desk. She ran her hand along the window shades, which I had opened exactly three quarters of the way. She heard me protest when she pushed a book further back than the spines of its brethren. And she seemed to realize that I was only one traumatic incident away from becoming a serial killer in my adult life.

Resolutely, Mom walked to my bed, yanked the covers askew, and told me, "You are seven. Don't make your bed anymore. It's not natural."

My hands extended involuntarily to flatten the covers back out, but Mom plopped down on top of them. An impulse to push her off raced through me as the asymmetrical Strawberry Shortcake comforter faced the west wall, not the east wall. *She won't be able to watch the sunrise*, I thought madly. *Strawberries need sunlight!*

Mom watched me carefully, reading the spasms of *need to clean* in my small face. With the pained expression of a parent doing something for a child's own good, she raised her hand, placed it over Strawberry's face, and mussed like crazy until the poor character was a wrinkled, weirdly pillowing old lady. I felt my nostrils flare, and Mom took my hand. "For every day that you do not make your bed, I will pay you a dollar."

Anxious to do something with my hands, I rubbed my arms, contemplating her offer.

"One dollar, starting today," she bribed. "Now, leave this bed and come make cookies with me."

She got up and walked out of the room, waiting at the top of the stairs for me to follow. Almost uncontrollable urges shot through me to pull the edges of the covers straight, but I knew Mom's watchful eyes would catch it. So I followed her downstairs and made cookies.

As promised, she gave me a dollar after she tucked me into bed. But when the lights went off, I made my bed in the dark before sleeping on top Shortcake's face.

Several months previous to my mother's discovery of my OCD, I had been busy pretending to be a cat—crawling around with Miss Kitty, drinking milk from a saucer on the floor, chasing balls of yarn, normal cat stuff—when, in a fit of actor integrity, I bit the bejesus out of my father's leg. He had said something insulting, and I, so certain of a cat's reaction to derogatory human speech, responded as any genuine feline would.

Now, when I say "bit," I don't mean that he was standing next to me and I nibbled his convenient ankle. I mean that he was in the kitchen, I was in the living room, he said cats don't stick their butts up that high, and I lunged leopard-style the entire distance between us to sink my blunt human teeth up to the gums in his soft calf flesh. Antagonized, steroid-abusing sharks couldn't bite as meanly as I did. Twenty years later, the man still has impressions of my first set of molars imprinted on his person, and he had to make up a story about a bar fight to save face when he wears shorts.

Needless to say, things were cool between us for a while, which was okay with me since he had turned into an ass the moment we'd arrived in Alabama. He hardly interacted with me, and he only spoke to Daniel in insults and put-downs; how Mom later

convinced him to become Daniel's Boy Scout pack leader was baffling. (The answer was that he enjoyed humiliating and embarrassing Daniel, most especially around Daniel's friends. Boy Scouts was a gold mine for him. But I didn't know that then.) A handful of months after Dad's leg wound stopped looking so nasty, Mom's aunt Birdie died.

Aunt Birdie—great Aunt Birdie to me—was a mysterious person whose only characteristic I knew about was her preposterously large breasts. Every anecdote I'd ever heard about the woman revolved around knockers bigger than some grown men's heads and the fun she had with them (the men and the breasts). In fact, she was creating stories even after her death because the funeral home had had a seriously difficult time finding a coffin large enough to contain her top portion but small enough that her bottom portion didn't smack around as she was carried places. I was sad that I would never meet her and confused as to why everyone from the south referred to the woman as my "ant" Birdie when she was clearly not a miniscule woman.

Her death put my father in a difficult position: he either had to go the funeral (be a good husband) or watch us kids (be a good father). Being no good at either job, he had trouble deciding what to do. On the morning of the funeral, Mom, unable to rouse him from bed, left without him, warning Daniel and I that he was there and could be called upon for emergencies…probably.

Once she had gone in her nice black dress, Daniel and I immediately ventured into the woods with tools we weren't allowed to use to build a tree fort that we weren't allowed to construct without adult supervision. My brother set me to sawing up logs while he shimmied up the thin pines to secure higher structures. Not much time passed

before I, sawing with far more flair than was appropriate, ripped a jagged gash in my thumb.

I wasted no time with screams; shouting "Band-Aids!" over my shoulder at Daniel, I ran toward the house for parental medical attention. He waved me onward, unable to help from his position halfway between two tall pines.

In the kitchen, Dad was drinking his coffee when I staggered in, clutching my thumb and dripping blood in a line over the floor. We paused, staring at one another, realizing that a combined effort would be needed in order to save me from permanent opposable damage.

Grudgingly, I admitted, "I hurt my thumb."

Dad grumbled acknowledgement and motioned me over to the sink. He inspected the gouged, chewed edges of my wound, which bled a brilliant red against the white of our old marble sink. Taking a sip of coffee with his free hand, he asked, "What happened?"

"I…hammered it." Saws were so forbidden by Mom that some of her passion for the subject might have slipped over to Dad simply by the osmosis of sleeping near each other.

"Hammered it?" He was torn between skepticism tinted by a small amount of curiosity and apathy tinted by A.M. sleepiness.

"Yes. With the back end of the hammer." I looked him dead in the eye as I lied. He looked back.

"Doing what?" It was not the leading question of a parent but the curious question of someone listening to a story that did not affect them. He wouldn't punish me because he didn't care. But he might mention the incident to Mom.

"...pulling bark off trees," invented my mouth as my brain wondered if this was at all plausible.

We stared for another moment, waiting for him to call me out.

"It hurts," I reminded him.

He shrugged and said, "Okay." Then he told me to wash it off while he got the Band-Aids. I received a dollop of Neosporin and three tourniquet-tight bandages. Though the doctoring method might wind up causing more damage than the open wound, I skipped back outside to help Daniel. Dad didn't try to stop me, or ask where I was going, or tell me to mind the hammer or avoid the tool altogether. All he said was, "Watch out for ticks," which to me meant, "I forgive you for chomping down on my leg and love you as my child, so please do not get Lyme disease in the woods because I cannot put Band-Aids on that." What he probably meant was, "Watch out for ticks."

When Mom got home, she and Nanny, my grandmother, were in stitches; Mom had thought of something funny Birdie had once done and was kicked out of the funeral for laughing uncontrollably. So distracted they were that neither noticed the garlic bulb of bandages at the end of my hand. It wasn't until a few days had passed, when I was caught rewrapping the wound, that Mom asked me what happened.

"Wrong end of the hammer," I answered, comfortable in my lie. "I was peeling bark from a tree."

Child-appropriate expostulations of "Bullshit!" were on her lips when I claimed that Dad had been watching us and knew it happened. Her mouth pinched shut.

She couldn't call me out because Dad wasn't around to question. Checkmate.

Three quarters of Daniel's ears hid beneath his shaggy black hair before Mom declared him a "beatnik" and forced him to the barbershop. I grew bored quickly at such businesses and tended to play with the tools reserved for trained professionals, a habit that the employees did not care for. Daniel's haircuts had ceased to be interesting ever since he realized the barber wasn't trying to kill him. Lucky for me, my other parent happened to be home and willing to pretend he would watch me.

Mom and Daniel left in the late afternoon, the perfect time for playing in the green house. I wandered out to the earthy enclosure to mix mud with other kinds of mud, attempting to create an explosion that would endow me with superpowers; however, after about half an hour of fruitlessly making nothing but muddier mud, I realized that superpowers were overrated and dinner would be much easier to obtain.

In the living room, Dad played his guitar as he sat on the coffee table. I queried him about a meal, and he concurred that food was a good idea, but he did not want to do any cooking. We would go out to eat, he said, and I hurrahed. He picked up his jacket and keys and began to walk out.

"Wait," I said, feeling something amiss. "Shouldn't we…shouldn't we leave a note for Mom about where we've gone?"

I could tell my father was apathetic to the idea. *Come on*, his expression said. *The keys are already in my hands*. But he shuffled diligently over to the junk drawer and pulled out writing supplies.

As he sat the yellow legal pad down on the table, a gleam came into his eyes. I watched him carefully, for I had seen this emotion painted on his face before and had never been able to name it. Instead of words, Dad drew a human head that resembled the PBS logo—a creature formed of three circles, a long rectangle, and one side of a triangle—next to what appeared to be a pitchfork.

"There," he said, leaving the amorphous drawing, still attached to the legal pad, on the coffee table. "Let's go."

"But what is that? What's that going to tell them?" I demanded, greatly disliking the satisfied smile curling my father's mouth. It was a strange, cruel expression that made his black eyes even blacker. "They're going to think a weirdly shaped demon took us."

With an unconcerned shrug, he said, "Meh. They'll figure it out."

A laundry basket's worth of questions floated through my head: How will they figure out what this means? What does this mean? Shouldn't we tell them where exactly we are going? What if they are hungry, too? What if they want to meet us? What time will we be back and should we write that information down for them? Shouldn't we put this note in a more obvious location?

The questions were all the more puzzling because I had never had to think them before. Usually, I accompanied Mom places, and she had a series of reasonable adult actions that she went through every day, the first of which was letting the rest of her family members know where she was.

Dad was almost tapping his foot by the front door. Quickly, I scribbled below the PBS head that we had "gone for food" and would "be back later" and then tore the sheet off the pad of paper and put it on the kitchen table. Although he didn't say anything, I could tell my actions had irritated him. I could not understand why, but I knew that Dad had wanted to confuse Mom and Daniel, wanted to worry them about where we had gone.

And that was the day I realized that I was more responsible than my father. I was seven years old.

I suspect that most divorces come from a slow collapse of a family, perhaps a hidden collapse that parents keep from children's eyes. Though my family's collapse was gradual, one incident seems to stand out as the Point of No Return for my parent's marriage and Dad's lucidity. This was the day that I dared things to get worse, and the gods of the dare universe said, "Oh, just you fucking wait, little girl. We decree upon your life:

C H A 0 S . "

This was the sort of day you look back upon and think, "I must have dreamed that. There's no way that actually went down," but then you read the police report sitting on your counter and realize your family must have been in the neighbor's paper.

Dad had been getting steadily crazier for months; he blamed everything, literally, on my mother. Forgotten lunch: Laurie's fault. Bad weather: Laurie's fault. Unrest in the Middle East: Laurie's fault. Kent sleeping with cheap floozies: Laurie's fault. This had

been a pattern since way before my birth and thus had been gnawing at Mom for years. She'd developed a complex of believing that everything was actually her fault, and she was so bent on saving her marriage that she didn't fight it. Only when Dad goaded her into rages did she really question him, and then he would tell her that he couldn't talk to her when she was "out of control."

Daniel had responded to the increase in crazy by delving deep into his collectables—Star Wars figurines, baseball cards, comic books—and obsessed over keeping his possessions in pristine condition. We didn't have much extra money, but he begged for the five-dollar-bills that would purchase him more, and Mom appeased him. She felt a constant guilt over our father's psychological abuse of Daniel—guilt mixed with anxiety over whether Daniel would be better off with an abusive father or no father at all.

He was tending to his comic books before school on the morning of No Return.

I hopped around the living room, trying to find a pair of matching shoes or at least one right shoe and one left shoe that fit into the same category, such as sneaker or sandal, while Dad was busy being a dick to Mom in the kitchen.

She would quietly ask him a really good question—where was he last night and whose lacy red panties were in his pocket?—and he would obnoxiously answer that he didn't have to answer. Furious but attempting to maintain her cool, Mom listed the multitude of reasons that he did, in fact, have to answer—because they were married, because he owed her the truth, because he *knew* she did the laundry and would clean out his pockets, because just *fucking* tell her—as she slammed around breakfast materials.

Though Dad was clearly trying to adhere to his usual fighting style, the basis of which was to stay completely calm and infuriate his opponent so he could call them "crazy" and "out of control," Mom's anger had bubbled over into what I called the Lethal Butterfly Zone: a Zen of fury that infuses the holder with a perfect balance of clarity and cutting wit. Named so because the person in the zone maintained the tranquil façade of a butterfly, Mom could literally slice flesh with spoken words, if she wanted to do so.

From my position in the living room, I heard her enter the Zone; her voice switched tones from accusatory wife to nature hike guide. Dad heard it, too, and though he did not understand what it meant, his instincts told him some serious shit was about to go down. His chair squealed against the floor as he stood up, waiting, nervous. He had not anticipated the situation to take this turn; he had expected Mom to get out-of-her-mind furious.

Mom began to talk in a voice too low for me to hear.

Dad responded in a loud, badly guised panic telling her to calm down.

Mom hissed more words, dangerous as a rattlesnake.

Dad shouted that that wasn't goddamned true, this was all her fault, anyway!

Mom's vicious hissing reached a crescendo; I could feel the tension, pulled so tight I could have twanged it like a rubber band. Unaware that I had moved, I found myself in the kitchen, staring at the back of my father's burning red neck and Mom's impassively neutral face; she could have been giving a weather report.

She said some final, inaudible thing—"There should be clouds coming in this afternoon with the wind"—and Dad snapped. He took one fast step to the counter, snatched the half-empty pot of coffee from its heater, and dumped it on his own face.

Then he screamed, around his loud stream of expletives, "Why the hell would you do that, Laurie?!"

Stunned, Mom plunged from the Lethal Butterfly Zone. She watched her husband stumbled over the floor, coffee soaking his head and clothes, moaning; his move was so unexpected, so bizarre, that she had no counter.

At first I wondered if Mom's power had grown so great that she had telekinetically controlled Kent, forcing him to pour scalding hot coffee on his own face. I think she wondered the same thing for a moment, and as neither of us could yet move from shock, we frozenly watched Dad drag himself to the small plant stand that our telephone sat on. He picked it up. He dialed. It rang. Someone (who could he possibly be calling?) answered.

"I need help," said Dad in a ragged, pained voice. Well, sure it was pained! He gave himself second-degree java burns! "My wife assaulted me. She threw a pot of burning coffee in my face."

The voice in the phone gave some answer, and he said our address. He hung up, felt his face—wet and a little red, but not as badly burned as I had been thinking—and walked to the bathroom. Turning on the sink, he slapped water at his nose and cheeks, forehead and chin. I thought he was tending to his injuries, trying to cool down the burning skin, and then I saw steam rising from the sink bowl. He was putting more hot water on his face?

Mom, too, was in wonder about his actions. She floated, as if in a dream, to the bathroom and asked, "What are you doing?"

Still keeping his face halfway submerged in what must have been extremely hot water, Dad turned his head toward her. His skin looked freakishly red after its scalding bath, and he said with a terrible grin, "Assault is an arrestable offense, Laurie."

Right on cue, I picked up the faint wail of a police car siren, and I realized what he had done. Dad had called the police on Mom; he was trying to get her jailed.

Stunned. We stood stunned. Mom couldn't even yank him away from the faucet because then he might get bruised in the attempt.

School was forgotten as the police stomped inside for the first of what was to be many visits. They pulled Dad out into the sunlight, examining at his face and listening to stories. Another set of police pulled Mom aside and questioned her. A young black officer walked between the groups, wearing a concerned look on his face.

Dad stuck to his tale that Mom had thrown a full pot of piping hot coffee at his head, burning his face severely. Mom told the insane-sounding truth. Nobody talked to me, the child, despite the fact that I was a witness. Daniel came downstairs, and they assumed I came with him. Mom didn't seem to realize I had seen what happened.

Since Dad's red face cleared up the longer the police talked to him, his story began to fall apart. Mom looked more and more the victim, and finally the black officer, whose nametag read "Fields," dismissed the others. He spoke privately with my parents, and then drove away.

No one had been arrested—not even Dad for assault on himself. He was furious that Mom had not been charged and drove off shortly after the police left.

But the crazy lived on.

For another year, we remained living under the same roof, which meant my father knew where to find and torture my mother and brother twenty-four hours a day. Why I was left out of the mix is still a mystery; perhaps I seemed too frail a target, or perhaps I was too similar to him. I quickly realized that whatever tactic he used, his victim need only imitate (such as staying calm and infuriating an opponent into doing something stupid), and he hated it.

Most parental arguments involved Mom presenting facts and Dad ignoring them. Many, many times after she realized that a divorce was inevitable, she asked him why he was doing the things he did: having affairs, psychologically abusing his family, sinking deeper into drugs than he had done at his most irresponsible teenage self—probably that last one helped explain the others somewhat—but he refused to give her a reason. He refused to speak of it at all.

Finally, after months of behavior similar to the day of No Return and playing stipulation games with Mom (if you *X*, I'll *X*; for instance, if you get a job, I'll leave you), he decided to move out. The only reason he gave was that he, he who had poured a carafe of coffee on his own face, just couldn't live with Mom anymore. He rented a small house not a mile from us—a good home base for watching us where we could not watch him.

Before he left, he told my brother that "he was the man of the house now" and that it was his job to protect our mother and me. Perhaps this was the greatest psychological torment he inflicted upon Daniel; Dad's later drugged-up invasions of our

home dictated that a pre-teen son fight off his own father by the father's previous order. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Because he had prevented Mom from getting a job and, at this and future times, waged wars to get out of paying child support, she had no income when he left. In fact, she had a sort of vacuum of income because Kent, playing his favorite stipulation game, threatened that if she received government assistance, he'd have her declared on unfit mother. As a child, listening at cracked doors and eavesdropping from the top of the stairs, it sounded like a game show of paradoxes:

Kent: Hello, everyone, and welcome to *How Will You Eat Today?*! I'm your host, Kent. Let's meet our only contestant and my soon-to-be ex-wife, Laurie! Come on down, Laurie! Are you ready to play? No? Too bad!

Step on over here, Laurie. No, right here. Actually, over there. No, here. There. Here. There. Right there! Exactly, Laurie, now don't move or you'll be disqualified. Now step over here, Laurie. Right here. Come on, right here. *BEEEEEP!* Oh, Laurie, why did you move? Now you're disqualified! Hold on, where are you going?

Laurie: I thought I was disqualified.

Kent: You are!

Laurie: But—

Kent: What's our motto, audience? Let's hear it!

There's No Escape!!!

Kent: No escape! (Chuckles) Okay, for the first round, step over here, Laurie. Now, Laurie's going to spin the Minimum Wage Job Wheel, and whatever job she lands

on, she gets and can feed her children with her meager income! Ready, Laurie? Let's count down, audience!

Three...two...one!

Kent: Wow-wee look at it go! Is it going to be…fry cook? Gas station attendant? Cashier? Retail jeans folder? Oh, oh! It's—it's mortgage consultant! AND SHE GETS A BONUS! Complimentary boss from Hell who hates you because you're skinny! Congratulations, Laurie, you lose your kids!

Laurie: What? No! You said I get to keep them!

Kent: Oh, no, your job keeps you too busy to take care of them. You're declared negligent by my power-lawyers! On to round two!

Laurie: Can I win my kids back?

Kent: Well, you certainly can't lose them twice. Or can she, audience, hmmmm? *Ha hah*! Okay, for round two, you must correctly answer the following three questions. Are you ready?

Laurie: What sort of questions?

Kent: GO! What is my favorite kind of cake?

Laurie: Cake? Uh, uh, chocolate marble!

Kent: Correct! How many dress shirts do I own?

Laurie: Twelve?

Kent: Correct again! Do I know our son's birthday?

Laurie: …yes? Yes, you know it?

BEEEEEP!

Kent: Oh, I'm sorry, Laurie! The answer we were looking for was "No." We also would have accepted "What son?" and "He doesn't deserve a birthday." You win a new car!

Laurie: My God, really?

Kent: Of course not! You double lose your kids!

Laurie: How can I even—

Kent: For our third and final round, let's move over to the obstacle course. While our contestant gears up, why don't we look over the terrain? Laurie will begin from this two-story high flag pole. She must jump from the top into the mud pit, swim across it without being bitten by the snapping tortoises, and climb into the tire swing maze! The maze, carefully hung over a garden of poison ivy, is constructed from the world's most unpredictable bungee cords and car tires recycled from playground equipment. At the end of the maze is this beautiful paper machete ledge, built entirely from the paperwork of our marriage license! Laurie must leap from the last tire swing onto the ledge that will crumble and drop her into the tunnel of snakes, which, as the name implies, is filled with alligators. Once Laurie has successfully crawled the fifty-foot tunnel on the backs of ornery reptiles, she reaches the Crisco-greased flagpole that she must climb to the top of in order to start the course again! If she stops running the course at any time ever, even after we've all gone home, her children automatically defect to me! Are you ready, Laurie?

Laurie: Kent, why do I have to do this?

Kent: Potatoes!

Laurie: You didn't even pretend to answer!

Kent: Threetwoone GO!

Eventually, I became convinced that my father could not possibly be as cruel as he appeared; he had to be planning a secret amazing birthday party for Mom, and to throw her off the trail, he had to pretend to be a huge asshole. This thought was so cheering that I shared it with Mom, who was positively unmoved, and Daniel, who remarked, "If so, he's going to win all of this year's Oscars."

I also imagined that the private detective Dad hired to track Mom was in on the plan; he must have been trying to figure out all of her favorite things so he could include them at the party. Though our first discovery of the detective did not exactly fit with my theory (an eight-year-old friend of mine saw a "ghost" out of the window during a sleepover and peed all over the bathroom rug), I became determined to see the truth I wanted—one of the few skills my father taught me.

I'm still waiting for that birthday party.

It was hard to tell when Dad left Alabama for good because he traveled a lot. We wouldn't hear from him for weeks, sometimes months, until a random night when he would break into the house in a drugged-up rage to terrorize us. The constant fear of a late night burglary—where usually the only goods stolen were our senses of safety, security, and peace—plagued us, forcing Daniel to sleep with an armory under his covers and me not to sleep at all. I took to crawling in bed with Mom, whose fox ears could

detect danger before it put a single foot on our porch, and through this manner I avoided becoming a psychotic insomniac.

Two particularly troubling break-ins seemed to prompt his departure, although to this day I don't know if he really left or simply took to the shadows to watch us.

The first especially bad break-in occurred on a late Saturday afternoon. Mom was outside doing yard work. Daniel was upstairs restacking his Magic cards, and I was on our computer lining up all the desktop icons in rows of descending size. I didn't hear Dad pull up in his white station wagon; I only learned of his presence when I heard Mom's cautious voice through the open front door: "What are you doing here, Kent?"

"I'm getting that kid!" my father's voice snarled, and his feet fell heavily on the porch.

"Get out of here, Kent." Mom was right behind him, speaking in her most authoritative voice. As she stepped in the house after Dad, I read a frightening array of emotions on her face: sadness, certainty, fear. Every time she saw him, her heart seemed to tear apart.

Dad, however, barely looked human. Wildly disarrayed hair—of both his head and moustache—framed his hollow face, his pupils fixed as wide as nickels in his glossy eyes; wrinkled but professional clothes hung on his predatory body as he walked with his knees bent, his arms extended and fingers arched. He moved as a lion moves, stalking its prey in a half-hunt, half-game. Though his eyes passed over me, he seemed quite unaware of my person as I hugged my legs in the slightly broken computer chair, frozen in the single terrifying thought that I was the kid to "get." Behind him, Mom grew louder

and louder in her insistence that he leave, but the man only stalked onward, circling the living room and then the kitchen. He walked like darkness, like death.

And then he began to call Daniel's name.

Above me, I heard minute shifting in the unfinished ceiling. Daniel had heard our father and had hidden somewhere upstairs. Having finished his sweep of the first floor, Dad came back to the living room and started his way upstairs; Mom's demands turned to shouts, growing more and more frantic. The word "police" popped up several times before the sentence got through to me: "Lacey, call the police! Call the police now!"

I had been told to call the police before, and sometimes the demand was just the final word in threating; Mom would tell me to call the police, knowing that I would hesitate, knowing that I would have to ask if she was serious, and she would have to say, "Call the police," in that dangerous, horizontal voice three times before I was actually supposed to phone the fuzz. Transfixed in the horror of my father's hunt, I hadn't properly heard how many times she'd given the command—one? five? sixteen? She could have been shouting it for two full minutes. Normally, I would have hesitated, waiting for a confirmation phrase.

"911, what's your emergency?"

Quickly stating my name and address, I explained, "My father is hunting my brother."

The woman paused in a curious but unsurprised way. "What do you mean by 'hunting'?"

"Hunting—like an animal! And if he catches him, I think it'll end like an animal hunt. I think," and here I stopped because hiding the truth had always been a vital part of

my familial discussions with other people. We dealt with our own problems, and faking normal lives for everyone else in the world was an important part of keeping other people out of our business. If I told this woman that I thought my father was on drugs, there was no un-telling her; my suspicions would go on record and probably on tape. Kent would probably be arrested on serious drug charges because he had clearly taken some serious drugs. But if I didn't tell her, then I was basically lying to the police and, more importantly, not stressing the direness of our situation. I swallowed, looked up at the ceiling where my father's feet fell, and admitted, "I think he's on some really bad drugs."

She told me that the police were on their way, and, hearing my father make his way around the attic and Mom demanding that he leave immediately, I hung up the phone. I wasn't sure of Daniel's exact location, but I knew he wasn't outside. I had to draw my father away from Daniel. As quietly as I could, I crept up about seven of the stairs, turned around, and ran down them, falling with all my weight and hitting each stair multiple times so that anyone listening would assume all twenty steps had been stepped on. My feet hit the living room floor, and I slammed the front door, running in place for a couple of seconds to mimic the sound of someone running off the porch. On extremely light feet, I scurried back to the computer chair and wrapped back up in my legs.

Packed with possessions as the attic was, my father took at least twenty seconds to reach the top of the stairs, and listening to him fly down four steps at a time nauseated me; while he was wasting his body with additives, power and strength still fed his muscles. He was definitely strong enough to win a fight with anyone in our family. He landed on the hardwood floor, ripped open the door, and launched himself outside.

By the time the police arrived, Dad had disappeared into the woods or the streets. His car had, apparently, never even been in the yard.

In the spirit of justified paranoia, Mom changed the locks after this incident. In fact, she changed the locks every few months, but this security measure did not stop Dad from re-appearing in our breachable house. Years later, she would surmise that he had purchased lock-picking materials and learned to break in like a seasoned burglar—a suggestion which seemed directly in line with his insatiable need to control our lives.

His next violent and final invasion, however, required no skills.

The time: Nine in the evening.

The atmosphere: Quiet, cool from the evening air.

The setting: Mom's downstairs bedroom.

The incident: Daniel, Mom and I, reading *A Wrinkle in Time* together, had almost fallen asleep in her bed. The world was peaceful and soft; I imagined that we felt as a pile of puppies feel while snoozing on a fluffy fleece blanket. Our standard perpetual fear of Kent had simmered to a low hum as the pleasantness of our situation took over and our minds drifted into the muting obscurity of sleep. Only the perceived safety of numbers can deliver such a primal sense of ease: *Someone will watch*, whispers instincts long dormant. *Someone will see danger.*

Over the soothing white noise of Mom's miniature fan, the faint slam of a car door drifted. It barely registered. It could have been the cat jumping down a few stairs or

a picture falling from a badly placed nail. It wasn't worth returning to consciousness to assess such a harmless thud.

A minute passed—fifty seconds longer than any visitor would take to walk from a car in the driveway to the front porch.

I lay a handful of brainwaves away from sincere slumber; even the damp, cold hair pressing on my face from a recent shower didn't bother me into thinking a bug perched on my cheek. *Someone will watch. Someone will see.*

And one millisecond before the very last thought of wakefulness drifted through my head, a crash of rhinoceroses piloting bulldozers battered against the front door—*KA-BAM! KA-BAM!* Three brains jerked back into consciousness, their limbs spasming involuntarily, smacking faces and pushing others off the bed, creating a chaotic jumble of covers, pajamas, and people.

KA-BAM! KA-BAM! KA-BAM!

"Stay here, don't turn on the lights." Mom's somehow fearful and fearless voice twistedout of the darkness, freezing my thrashing appendages as I clung to her instructions from my strangled position on the floor and tangled in the middle bed sheet. I could hear Daniel halfway on the mattress, fighting with a ripped dust ruffle as silently as possible. Somehow, Mom had extracted herself and ran tiptoed to the door, hissing another demand of silence, stillness, and darkness at us before pulling the knob—and by extension, the whole door—up so the bottom wood wouldn't squeak against the sill as she ghosted out. She shut it firmly behind her.

Daniel and I struggled in the darkness as the out-of-sight assault continued; the collisions increased in speed and strength. How the old oak door withstood even half a

dozen of those impacts is a scientific mystery, and as I gained the wherewithal to question my rhinoceros theory, a terribly familiar voice began to rage in tune with the *KA-BAM*s.

No words were discernible in those crazed, raving shrieks, but the emotions fueling the sounds were all too clear.

Mom had to be calling the police. She had to be calling the police. There was no way she would go to the door and try to deal with Kent herself. *There was no way. There was* NO WAY. *Shehadtobecallingthepolice!*

"Shut up!" Daniel shrieked shrilly, and I clamped my hand over my mouth, only then understanding that I had been speaking aloud. Incredible amounts of blood pounded through my head, my heart beat painfully hard, I could hear it in the darkness—an angry, rhythmic ocean revenging all the briny creatures ever lost to man's appetite—

An ominous cracking began to accompany each powerful hit; he would reduce the century-old door to matchsticks, pit the splinters on his arms and legs like porcupine quills, guard his body with wooden spikes like the forts at Toulouse, skewer us on the ends and wear us as armor, too—doors meant nothing to him—barriers meant nothing, he would break them—he would find us—

Daniel bolted. Fear or panic or the desire to help Mom—the reason hardly mattered as he fiercely spat at me to hide and slipped out of the room, his dark silhouette barely blacker than the briefly opened doorway. I was alone in the cold, empty bedroom with my unhelpfully active imagination.

Shouts echoed around the lightless house; the front door burst open and slammed against the wall, and the sounds of all hell breaking loose fed the dramatic comic book

panels that my mind supplied. Feet punched the wood of the living room floor and became muted as Dad stormed into the kitchen, searching for any living body to torture. Other feet ran on hollowly wooden floors and up carpeted stairs, although I couldn't tell who and Dad couldn't tell where because he'd never been a good listener, never bothered to pay attention to the sounds of the house.

As he hesitated in the kitchen, I scrambled for a weapon. My hands slid over all sorts of useless trinkets—compact mirrors, socks, a towel, one flip-flop—as the fear ravaged my adrenaline levels, shaking my hands and breath. He had to be able to hear each desperate squeeze of my heart as I frantically, blindly searched for anything that would level the odds between a nine-year-old girl and an adult man.

And finally, finally my fingers closed around a two-foot-long twirling baton that I had been carelessly tossing around earlier. It was black and purple, solidly made and capped on each end by a fat rubber stopper. Since I had been chastised that morning for bopping Daniel with it, I knew it had the potential to do damage.

In the kitchen, Kent finally heard some noise that he recognized; I heard him let out a psychotic, devilish laugh and lunge toward the living room. Daniel's wordy shrieks indicated that he was the target, and I had about two seconds of deliberation before I, too, yanked open the bedroom door and plunged into more darkness.

Someone was running, perhaps several someones; I made out Dad's large form staggering toward the stairs, and I knew my brother was there, trapped on the steps, taking a last stand.

"Stop it!" I screamed, running and raising my baton to deliver the most powerful strike that someone who can't throw a basketball all the way down a court is capable of administering.

Kent, distracted, turned toward me and—I watched as if in slow motion—snatched my falling baton out of the air and out of my hand. It left my grasp with a painful jerk, and I fell, misguided by the suddenly lack of momentum.

His terrible, demoralizing laughter shot at me, and in the darkness, I could see a flash of his meanest, teeth-gritted smile. Seeming wildly amused, he shrieked, "What were you going to do?" and, as if in demonstration of his suspicions, he bent his knees in an attack position and began to inflict strikes against me with my own weapon.

I ducked and scrambled, my mind filled with the primeval urge of escape as the baton made contact with me in stinging, whip-like blows along my back, arms, and legs. I tried to run, to find a defensive weapon, to accomplish anything except being the recipient of a round of beating, until suddenly my father jerked away, alarmed by a nearby wail. He released the baton for some reason, and I backwards crab-scuttled out of the way to crumple into a mild state of shock behind the couch.

My bruises, I thought, seeing and hearing nothing as the marks on my body pulsed painfully in variously angled baton-shaped lines, *will be the color of the weapon that made them.*

After a moment of breathing and gradually becoming furious that my father had turned me into a physically abused child—a demographic I had long been proud of being excluded from—my hearing returned to pick up a scuffle still underway in the computer room. Fear and anger warred in my brain, throwing me into a halting leap tempered by

the very likely possibility of further beatings. Just as I started to gain control of my limbs and move to join the fight again, a glorious team of police officers, led by my one stable parent, streamed inside; Mom had run out moments before to flag down the law.

With their wonderfully commanding presence, the lights came on, and Kent was tackled. Three men leaped on him, wise to the drug-infused powers that removed his fear and inhibitions about endangering others. They wrestled on the ground, and Kent fought with the craze of a trapped animal. Mom retrieved me just as one officer sat on Dad's chest and another bear-hugged his legs together.

The police, a beautiful squadron of sanity, organized quickly, assessing the splintered door, Dad's car half-parked in the bushes, the adrenaline rushed bodies of the children. They reached the correct conclusions but still required us to tell the story. I let everyone give statements before I came forward. I was ashamed of being hit and fearful of telling the police that I had intended to hit first; might they arrest me, I wondered, if I told them that I had intended to beat my father off my sibling? That's the way it worked in public school; he who threw punches, defensive or not, faced penalties.

But I didn't have to speak; quick-eyed officer Fields, who had been to our home several times since the coffee incident and was aware of my father's temperament, saw me rubbing my arm as he walked past. Gently, he took my tiny arm in his huge hands, glanced from the red welt to my eyes and said, "He hit you here." I nodded, afraid to speak, afraid of the consequences of verbal confirmation, afraid of lying and not lying. Angrily and with no doubt, he said, "This isn't the only one." I shook my head.

He didn't ask to see them; instead, he took me to Mom, who immediately noticed the marks I was now not attempting to hide. A unique sort of horror overtook her face,

and I'm certain that if Kent had not been in the back of a police car, she would have palm-thrusted his nose directly into his brain. It was a chilling expression but possessed a relieving finality; no matter how depressed and heartbroken she felt, Mom would never again look upon Kent without at least trace of that stony, crush-your-larynx hardness.

The police drove me down to the station to take pictures of the marks. Officer Fields bubbled with a nuclear fission grade fury, but when he looked at me, all I saw was sorrow. He apologized to me as a young female cop took his place to photograph the parts of me that clothing and the rules of decency covered. Later, as he and Mom talked in his office about what would happen next, he let Daniel and I play on his computer and saved our digital drawings as his desktop background.

And though Dad now had this official black mark on his record and a budding young police officer ready to witness against him, we remained unsure of whether he would be able to beat the truth in court.

As Dad's army of ultra-expensive attorneys secretly met and bargained with our cheap lawyer, an aura of desperation descended upon our already depressing household. Kent's drive to take every ounce of comfort away from his family was both endless and well-funded; he seemed bent on pushing us toward starvation or death by exposure in our shack house. But with Tom Petty's "Won't Back Down" as her theme song, Mom refused to let her controlling, mentally disturbed husband push her off the edge, and we subsisted off damaged canned goods from a discount store in Slapout. We would survive out of spite.

Aside from a crippling emotional depression natural to victims of nasty divorces and abuse, Mom had a weakness: her children. Kent swore that he would have us—whether by legal means or maneuvers similar to those of an African warlord. Our trip to the beach resulted from Mom's desires to (A) prove we could exist happily without Kent and (B) live just one freaking day without the fear of kidnapped children looming over her.

How, you may ask, do poor people go to the beach? How does one fund and execute such a trip?

The process begins with a Styrofoam cooler borrowed from relatives who go to NASCAR events and thus possess such luxuries. Two nights before departure, one family member—me—oversees multiple freezings of two ice trays; once a tray had hardened, the ice must be dumped into a large bowl situated at the bottom of the freezer—but not near the walls, which, heated by aged wiring, burn like stoves—in order to build up an appropriate amount of cooling cubes. Another family member—Mom—prepares every meal that will be eaten over the three days of the trip and double stacks sandwiches in baggies, which will be reused to store beach shells because no money = waste nothing. Another family member—Daniel—complains that camping on the beach is a terrible, miserable idea that will land everyone with sandy butt cracks and buggy hair. He is right, but nobody is allowed to say this.

The day before departure, everyone packs triple sets of clothes; since campsites do not typically feature washing machines, each person is stuck wearing whatever ocean-soaked clothes he or she winds up in, and the only way of cleaning them is to soak them further in the ocean. Someone will, inevitably, forget to pack extra shorts and will

permanently smell up the car with their briny salt-starched bottoms. The male family member—Daniel—is instructed to set up both two-man tents (leftover from somebody's days at Woodstock) in the backyard to make sure all the pieces are there and the holes aren't too big to patch. This member gets frustrated a third of the way into the task, kicks the tents, and lies about all the sticks being present. He will later regret this.

Finally, after everything has been packed into the car so that no actual purchases have to be made during the trip, the family—and one friend that someone (Daniel) *had* to bring—sets off, riding the three hours to Pensacola with the windows down because being poor automatically means that the air conditioner is broken. A species of invisible gremlin mechanics exists solely to fulfill this sociological need. The family travels, by the way, clothed only in bathing suits because it is July in the south, aka the temperature of the sun, and being in a car in this weather is exactly like sitting in a baking potato. Strangers in passing vehicles are constantly almost crashing as they glance at the woman in a bra driving a little girl in a hoochie mama top and two naked teenage boys in the back snacking on a full pack of deli meat.

Arriving at the campsite means struggling to unload a cooler full of sloshing, melting ice onto a splintery picnic table, putting up three-fourths of a tent, and ignoring the stares of other campers as the mostly nude family fights against their own sweaty, sunscreen-slickened hands and the squadron of mosquitoes that was waiting for them to arrive. Also, the boys have been and will continue to speak in their raspy, moronic *Beavis and Butthead* voices, mostly repeating the show's catchphrase, "I am *Cornholio*!" Strangers have never seen this show and think the boys simple; they shoot sympathetic looks and leave gifts of Doritos on the table when no one is looking.

Beach activities include anything that is free: swimming in the salty water, playing on the shore with the sand fleas, building up a blistering sunburn because one family member (me) is allergic to the "blue" sunblock, hiking through the tick-infested woods that the family will be sleeping in that night, instigating rock fights with the kids from campsite 14, losing a sandwich in the ocean due to failed multitasking, etc. When nighttime comes, the family builds a fire from nearby pine twigs (it is a small fire) and lashes up the collapsed tent with a piece of fishing wire they found on the beach. Though the night is god-awful hot, two family members—Mom and I—must sleep in the station wagon because the scarce sticks from the blue tent were sacrificed to the sort-of working green tent, and now all the blue tent's good for is chasing when it flies away in the wind.

At this point in the process, a puzzle comes into play; in order to not die of heat exhaustion, the women must roll down the car windows, but in order to keep out the insanity-inducing bugs, the women must keep the windows up. So they try to stretch extra clothes across the rubber of the rolled-down windows, allowing a whisper of breeze to cool the car's interior. The clothes will fall down in the middle of the night, and bugs will get inside, but that's small potatoes compared to the *other* problem; one family member (Daniel) has lost the bucket of crabs he collected on the beach. He last had them in the car when he was looking for a flashlight. The family can see by dome light (for by now all flashlights are long lost) on the driver's seat an upturned bucket leaking wet sand and no crabs because they have already escaped into the closed system that the women will be sleeping in.

With the fear of pinching crustaceans dancing through the youngest family member's head, the women attempt sandy, sticky sleep. The daughter fears waking to a

crab on her face, and the mother—who has not taken a vacation without her husband in twenty years—thinks of the knife (the cheapest weapon that any given person already owns) she has hidden under her pillow in case of bandits. Both dose restlessly until the mother accidentally flops onto the daughter's long, long hair, yanking it exactly as hard as a crab would yank it. Shrieking and flailing, the daughter crashes out of half-sleep, frantically struggling to get away, unable to verbalize the trouble. The mother thinks her worst fears confirmed and thrashes violently, grabbing for her protective knife, which has actually fallen onto the floorboard. The more she struggles for her knife, the harder she yanks her daughter's hair, who screams in relation to each yank. God knows what the poor crabs were thinking.

After half a minute of this blind fight, the mother discerns two words from her daughter's wails: "My hair! My hair!" Miraculously, as the mother stops moving, so does the daughter, and clarity comes to both. Unfortunately, clarity has not come to the rest of the campers, and some concerned soul has called the police.

The two teenage boys are nowhere to be found; they have snuck off to spy on other campers. When they see the police arriving at their camp, they stay hidden, certain trouble awaits them, and the mother/daughter team has difficulty convincing the Florida police of the truth. By the time the situation has been resolved, the sun is nearly up and bugs have completely permeated the car. The women catch a few hours' sleep in the deflated tent as the teenagers steal ground stakes from the camp 14 kids and then stick around to watch three confused twelve-year-olds fight their way out of a gently crushed shelter.

By day two, everyone has resolved to enjoy this rare vacation, but nobody is really having fun anymore. They swim resentfully, stand in shadows when possible, and coat down in a pungent combo of off-brand SPF 40 and insect repellant. Each person looks slightly more monstrous than the day before as a many-layered caking of human products, salt, and bug bites begins to set in on the skin. The sandwiches have gone soggy in the cooler, and somehow the lip of every drink comes with the crunch of sand particles. Since so many clothes were lost to the Battle of the Car Windows, the family members are left wearing the bathing suits that they wore on the drive down and in the ocean yesterday. Campsite 14's kids won't come within smelling range to revenge the stolen tent gear.

This second night is slightly more restful for the women, who aired out the car midday and sleep secure that tonight could not possibly be worse than the previous evening. The boys, after snooping, discover a campsite full of teenage girls who keep very bright lights in their thin tents and change clothes a lot. Once again, the boys are out all night.

In the morning, the women happily pack up a few minutes after dawn. They look as normal as two people who have bathed only in the sea for two days can look; their companions, however, are grotesque. The boys have hardly slept for two nights, forgot to put sunscreen on their feet and faces yesterday, and will only communicate in their Cornholio voices. They irritate everyone in the car, even themselves.

On the way home, the family stops for gas, releasing the children into the building to use the bathroom. This tank of gas and the five-dollar campsite are the only expenses of the whole trip. One family member (Mom) goes inside to find her children, and she

notices people watching the boys, who are shuffling their painfully burned feet in slow, jerky motions and parroting the same three *Beavis and Butthead* phrases. They are also playing a game to see who can make weirder bug-eyed faces, and as strangers look at her approvingly, Mom realizes that they think she is caring for two mentally handicapped teens.

Unable to help herself, she swallows her giggles and barks, "Stop acting more retarded that you actually are before I have to beat you again!" to the horror of everyone listening. "Get in the car! Go!"

It is the most fun she has the entire trip. For weeks after, she must suffer the stench of decomposing sea creatures in the car until a desiccated crab carcass bounces out of the woodwork on a bumpy road. She finds it well worthwhile.

While the private detective did not tail us to Florida, the house was heavy with his presence when we arrived home. Perhaps Dad let him in or perhaps he picked the lock himself; either way, the marks of his search were unmistakable. The air tasted a little less stale than a normal closed house would. Some of our dresser drawers sat a few centimeters ajar. A foreign candy wrapped rested on Daniel's carpet. Mom's room looked like a chicken the minute after a fierce wind bowls it over: almost put together but ruffled around the tail feathers.

Of course, he would have found nothing. We had nothing in general and nothing to hide in particular, but the simple reminder of our extremely permeable home threw further panic on Mom. As a defensive maneuver, she called Kent to tell him that having a

private eye around wasn't bothering her, she'd happily tell him anything he wanted to know about the drugs she wasn't doing and the men she wasn't sleeping with, but he caught her off guard by feigning to have found incriminating evidence in our home. There was no way he wasn't lying, but the threats attached to his fibs could have been certificated by Honest Abe Lincoln: "I will take your children. You will try to pick them up from school one day and find them gone. You'll never see them again."

Small tremors shook her hands when the phone clicked dead.

Fear of alarming her children watered down the warning as she translated it to us, cautioning us to travel in pairs, pay special attention to strangers, and get in cars with no one. We no longer played outside by ourselves, and if Mom was at work, we were forbidden to open the door for any reason. Sacrificing our individual identities, we became a pack, sleeping in the same room, constantly sniffing for danger, and staying within fifteen feet of each other unless physical barriers prevented us.

When the time came that Mom realized Dad was paying her lawyer off and she would have to take matters into her own hands, she agonized over what to do with us. She absolutely did not want to bring us on her mission, but the fear that someone would steal us away while she was gone was too powerful to discount. Until Daniel and I could legally not be filched off to Massachusetts and given to our grandmother to raise, we had to remain within spitting distance of each other and Mom.

The small dwelling on Woodland Road was settled in the backyard of another home, which made the journey to it especially terrifying because we could not know if anyone was in the main house, watching. Or if there was a car parked out of sight, waiting to scout intruders.

Darkness lurked behind the house, and the driveway seemed infinitely long as we crept down it in our conspicuous station wagon. Tall, splintery pines dominated the large backyard that Dad's rented house—which had clearly once been a simple storage facility—settled a small corner of. It looked Shakespearian tragedy-grade ominous.

"Stay in the car," Mom instructed, her eyes scanning three hundred sixty degrees around as we bounced down the drive. Immediately, we put up a quiet but fierce fight; we would not be left in an exposed station wagon to watch our only good parent enter a sinister house of unknown dangers. "*Shhh*, fine! Don't move anything. If you see something, tell me and I'll deal with it."

Involuntarily, I inched down in my seat until my forehead was level with the car window. The "something" we might see could fall into a number of categories: phone records, drug paraphilia, bank statements, incriminating photos, dead prostitutes in the bathtub—there were too many possibilities to consider. Although not yet ten years old, I had already learned the many faces of incriminating evidence. I was now learning how to secretly enter a house and search it without leaving a trace. My knowledge was becoming far too complete.

Mom parked around the back of the small house because we didn't look suspicious enough yet. Daniel and I did not actually close our car doors but pushed them within an inch of their frames to avoid the loud latching sound. The pine needles that fully covered the yard muted our footsteps as we tiptoed over to the entrance, which Mom opened with a mysteriously acquired key and a tube sock covering her hand (to avoid fingerprints). Like prisoners on the run, we ghosted into the house; our shadows made more noise than we did.

The lamps, which I could faintly see as my eyes adjusted, had to remain off to attract the least amount of attention, so I had no visual confirmation that my father lived here; however, from the moment the door almost closed behind me, his smell invaded my nose: a combination of sweat, musky manliness and faint organic decay. The decay came from his garbage that never found its home in the garbage can and instead decorated whatever space he occupied until it rotted away. Because the dwelling was so small, his scent had polluted every inch.

We instinctively knew what had to be done; Daniel and Mom had already infiltrated the kitchen and bedroom while I'd been waiting for my eyesight to regulate and the surprising force of Dad's presence to stop freaking me out. Daniel, with the hem of his shirt, silently opened and closed cabinets, peering inside and shaking his head microscopically before moving to the next. Mom flipped through pieces of mail with the wrong end of a pen, a look of concentration and sadness on her face. Emboldened by their efforts, I moved into the half of the living room that contained my father's weight bench and examined as closely as I could without actually touching anything. Nothing especially suspicious occupied this area: some badly stacked weights, two ashtrays full of reeking cigarette stubs, an old clicking radiator, a pair of unlaced sneakers, empty beer cans. A soft snick issued nearby: the click of a disposable camera Mom had brought.

In the kitchen, Daniel's hand slipped and the cabinet snapped shut with a loud *bap*! He jumped, waiting for an axe to fall, jerking his head around as if police were going to jump out of the shadows and cuff him. I understood the feeling; every moment we were here was a moment too long, another second that someone could spot our irregular car, a potential spot on Mom's blemishless record that wouldn't bode well for us

in the divorce. A sickening, sloshing fear churned beneath my skin, but the necessity of this B&E weighed too heavily upon all of us to quit. After hastily opening the fridge to find nothing but empty pizza boxes and olives, Daniel scurried near the bedroom where Mom was wrapping something in her tube sock.

I had been peering at a pile of palm-sized papers and loose sugar on the coffee table when Mom, her voice tight and grim, said, "Okay, that's it. Let's go." She headed toward the door, clutching the wadded tube sock tightly and stuffing crumpled papers into her pockets. I started to move behind her when a stupid question entered my mind: Why would the coffee table be covered in loose sugar?

"Mom," I whispered, jerking my head back toward the table.

She was pale and strained but moved quickly upon seeing the table and, her mouth pressing into a hard line, snapped a picture.

We were done; we each felt that our time was up. Carefully dragging our feet across the carpet to erase any footprints we made on the plush fabric, we let fear pull us silently back to the car. Mom locked the house back up with her jacket sleeve, and we waited until she had to start the car to close our doors. The combined sounds were ungodly loud after so much silence; Daniel, seated up front with Mom, placed both his hands on the dashboard tightly, as if urging us forward. Slowly, we bumped down the long drive, holding our breath; somehow, this was the most terrifying moment of all. If another car pulled in the driveway—Kent's or his landlord's—they would block us in this one-lane strip, and there would be no other explanation for why we were there.

Halfway down the drive, we saw a car turn onto Woodland road. Enough pines obscured the view so that we couldn't tell what kind of vehicle it was, and Mom

muttered, "*Shit*," but kept driving. Our station wagon crept closer and closer along, as did the mystery vehicle.

In the middle of the backseat, I bounced up and down, ignoring my seatbelt in order to lean forward between Mom and Daniel. Wild excuses flew through my head: We were trying to find our dad to tell him about a school project, to give him something we had in the car (jumper cables?), to deliver a phone message. We were lost, thought this was a road, turned accidentally. Wanted to take a picture of the pine trees. Chased a lost dog here. Broke into a house to collect evidence in a divorce. That last one wouldn't really do.

"Act natural," is what I would have said if my heart hadn't been blocking the path from vocal chords to mouth; it hammered violently, suspending my speech. Instead, my silence said, "Act as if we just committed a crime and are making the world's slowest getaway." Mom, too on edge to give us instructions, gripped the wheel with iron hands and locked onto that other car—the car that definitely had someone in it, the car that would probably destroy our lives.

"It's Dad," Daniel whispered.

"It's the police," I hissed.

"It's no one," Mom breathed as the unfamiliar car passed the driveway without a pause.

All my muscles, which had been painfully tensed, relaxed, melting me into the backseat. As we pulled out of the driveway, Daniel eyed the tube sock and asked, "What did you find?"

But she refused to tell us. All she would say, over and over again, was "I am so sorry."

We needn't have feared discovery by Kent because he had rented a private yacht and sailed to the Bahamas that week; the rental receipt that Mom had stuffed in her pocket proved that one of many outrageous purchases. Since Dad had put such deeply damaging psychological strains on Mom, she was in desperate need of unaffordable counseling, and through this void of outlet, I became her confidant. It was a heavy task for someone who hadn't hit puberty, but I matured fast out of necessity. I learned of the yacht trip during one of our sessions when Mom cried, "He's chartering trips to the equator and I'm going into debt every week just paying for water," but then remembered to whom she was talking and tacked on, as she always tried to, "but he's your father and he loves you." I silently called bullshit.

During the beginning stages of the divorce, when allegations were still being formed, Kent claimed that our mother poisoned us against him—that we hated him because our mommy told us to hate him. One day when he came by the house for some of his records, I pointed to the half-inch crack flooding air through the front door and said to him, "She didn't need to poison us; you did fine on your own." I don't think it helped him like me any more.

In the meantime, Mom, Daniel, and I were still living in a house with no ceilings, stair rails, or insulation—a house with walls sponge painted to "hide the cracks" and long openings in the floor that were insect gateways and heat suckers. When Mom decided

that we needed to sell the house and purchase a small, manageable trailer, Daniel and I were all for the idea. This house was synonymous with dirty, exhausting, interminable work.

To keep us more temperature comfortable, Mom collected every piece of Styrofoam that came her way and stuffed the walls with it. She closed up the fireplaces, which had probably violated a lot of safety regulations to begin with, and with the help of my grandfather set up gas heaters instead. To fix up the house and make it look worth purchasing, we three put in sheetrock ceilings—months and months of the worst gravity-fighting work imaginable. Since we worked with zero knowledge of how to install a ceiling properly, we wound up stomping the sheetrock with thick wall paint that peaked into hundreds of haphazard stalactites, daggers waiting to obliterate stray helium balloons. We also put sheetrock over the attic skeleton, which made it harder for the cat to crap up there. Harder, but not impossible. In fact, the notion that we were acting to prevent her deed seemed to incite Miss Kitty; she pooped there more frequently and frantically than ever. Keeping cat shit out of the attic was impossible, so I settled on letting the area get so pooped up that the cat would refuse to use it. The plan backfired, and cleaning it up was like navigating a minefield.

We worked on the house during any spare time we had, and when Daniel would get irritated and give up, Mom and I would continue onward, replacing carpentry skills with creativity and legitimate tools with old stuff we found in the long unused chicken coop. We also had to keep the house spotless all the time, which was fine by my growing obsessive compulsive mind, but Daniel began to resent our lives, the predicament our father left us in, and the work needed to keep us afloat.

Mom worked harder than Daniel and I combined. She never stopped. I think the world's first robots were based on satellite videos of my mother. I began to worry about the far-off day that she wouldn't have to work all the time because of a passage from C.S. Lewis's *The Boy and His Horse*: "[O]ne of the worst results of being a slave and being forced to do things is that when there is no one to force you any more you find you have almost lost the power of forcing yourself" (268). Though she wasn't an actual slave, she definitely worked slavishly ever since the move to Alabama. All of our lives had become a game of placation, figuring out how not to poke the various angry bears patrolling our camp. Without the constant drive of having to push someone else, I wondered if my mother would one day fall apart.

And then I realized why I'd thought about robots: robots *never* stop. They continue into infinity, and that is exactly what my mother would do.

One afternoon, I was studying upstairs, and her shrieks traveled up to me as clearly as if I was sitting on her shoulders.

In the bathroom, Mom had been vigorously sponging up a round of Scrubbing Bubbles. Leaning halfway into the tub, her arm rested on the rusty hot water handle, which supported more and more of her weight as she stretched to clean corners. The handle's unstoppable leak had been growing more pronounced for a few months, and Mom's distracted cleaning took her mind off this one of many broken or breaking items in our house. Balancing her knee against the tub's edge and her forearm against the handle, she reached to wipe a line of bubbles from the shower ledge and—*CRABAP*! The handle jaggedly cracked off into the drain, throwing Mom to the bathtub bottom and spraying hot water full-blast from the showerhead.

I arrived to find her luging around bathtub like a drunken athlete; the mixture of steamy water and residual cleaner slicked up any part of her body that touched the tub, tossing her hither and thither as she scrambled to get out of the hot water path.

Of course, I had no idea what was really going on and assumed my mother to be a willing participant in this extremely peculiar and masochistic activity. Only when she started to tear down the shower curtain in desperation to find secure purchase (scrambling-cat style) did I realize she was attempting to escape, not emulate a sailboat caught in a hurricane.

"Turn off the water!" I instructed several times as I fished for her, wondering why in God's name we had to do this with scalding liquid pouring over our heads. Mom shrieked incoherently, unable to verbalize the damage done to our plumbing. She clamped onto my arms with both her hands, and I grabbed fistfuls of her soaked t-shirt and jeans into order to drag her from the tub.

Finally, wrapped in half the ripped shower curtain, we staggered out of our tiny bathroom, pooling water on the kitchen floor as we moaned and clawed the toxic bathroom cleaner from our eyes. Mom yanked me to the kitchen sink and forced my face under a stream of cold water, waiting until I violently pin wheeled backward in protest to rinse her own eyes.

"Why?!" I demanded, panting and gesturing wildly back toward the bathroom. "What happened?!"

Mom barely explained, her head partially immersed, her words garbled. Although my eyes still smarted, I stomped into the bathroom and squinted through the falling water at where the hot water handle had once been firmly stationed. A jagged, pencil-thin pipe

jutted from the wall, dripping water madly. Angry, I gripped it, twisted, pushed, and pulled; nothing happened. Hot water continued to fall from the showerhead until I punched down the extremely resistant middle knob affixed to the faucet; hot water then began to pour from the bottom spout instead. Too young to be an effective curse word user, I kicked the bathtub several times and shouted, "Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!"

When I emerged, Mom asked cheekily, "Did you fix it?"

"No," I muttered.

She smiled. "Come on. Rinse your eyes again. Going blind would be especially unhelpful right now."

The faucet continued to pour, gushing quickly past our standard seven minutes of hot water to spit out icy liquid. Daniel, who had finally come down from his room to check out the commotion, stood beside Mom and I as we attempted to tape down the broken tap. Through trial and error, we learned that the water would stop so long as a constant, firm pressure pushed against the broken handle.

"Call a plumber," said Daniel as the pipe tore through a tenth layer of duct tape. I ripped an eleventh piece from the roll and handed it to Mom.

"We can't," she said, carefully pressing the pipe down before she applied more silver magic. "We don't have the money."

Since we didn't have the money to buy french fries from McDonald's, Daniel knew good and well that we didn't have the money to hire a professional plumber. He made an irritated noise and, his contribution to the problem apparently over, left to play with his Magic cards. Too annoyed with his unhelpfulness to call him out, I settled for complaining about the futility of our task.

"Even if the tape sticks," I said, "we won't be able to use the hot water. The tape won't stick again after we unstick it."

"Hot water is a commodity," Mom told me, not looking me in the eye. "I had to heat hot water on the stove if I wanted a bath when I was your age…and walk two miles in the snow to school. Uphill both ways, carrying your Aunt Jean. We'll have to make do. Look there! It's holding!"

For a glorious moment, the power of the tape overcame the protruding pipe; we gazed affectionately at the blob of grey bulging from the wall. Beauty, I thought, comes from so much more than appearance.

Schtzzzzzzzzz! The faucet hissed and stabbed a hole in the tape bandage. Water, once again, gushed from the faucet.

"Damn it! Jesus Christ!" Mom swore, and I threw the duct tape to the floor.

Hours passed as we concocted makeshift fixes for the faucet. We pressed a quarter against the jagged pipe edge so it would not stab through the tape: the quarter always slipped off, even underneath the tape. We wound rubber bands with puzzle-like intricacy over the faucet, surviving handle, and broken pipe: the bands snapped and struck us in our faces. We set dual vice grips to gripping one another and the pipe: the wet environment reduced the friction between the tools and sent them clattering loudly into the tub. We both yelled and demanded the pipe to just goddamned stop it: the pipe ignored us and released more water.

Exasperated, we resorted to scavenging the old tool shed and chicken coop for new ideas. The Sellars, from whom we had purchased this old farmhouse, had junked up the chicken coop with unused tools and equipment, and we had junked up the tool shed

similarly, so between our two generations, a mountain of moderately useful garbage was at our disposal. In hopeless situations, Mom and I usually turned to this unconventional source for inspiration and decayed supplies.

As cold and dark and damp as any building in a Poe story, the tool shed's interior always chilled its occupants, even on ridiculously hot summer days. Perhaps this is one reason that it was our last resort; going inside was downright unpleasant. I searched at an accelerated rate so that I could get out faster, and in my haste, I struck my arm on a cylindrical stick of light colored wood, several feet in length and two of my fists in diameter. Inspiration also struck me, much less painfully than the wood.

"This!" I cried, holding the wood over my head triumphantly. "This is what we need!"

I ran to the bathroom, tracking mud and tool shed grime everywhere. Mom followed, unsure of my plan. I explained that all we needed was a wedge, a firm wedge to keep the water off, and I demonstratively placed one end of the thick stick against the sharp pipe, pushing it hard to stop the flow of water; however, the wood was a few inches short of hitting my target: the back of the shower.

We needed a small, flat object that would provide friction and stability when jammed in between the stick and the shower wall. I said as much, dropping the stick in the tub in order to go searching. Mom searched with me, considering pots, pans, wadded up sweaters, more wooden planks, Daniel's useless hands, cushions—anything and everything that could possibly fit in this gap, but nothing seemed to work.

Optimistic for another thwack of inspiration, I wandered into my own room, scanning the ground and second-hand shelves. Just past the L-bend, on top of my two-by-four book shelf, sat my fairy tale book, pristine and firm and a few inches wide.

The standard slew of mystical creatures populated its cover, leaping over each other and transforming into other things. They looked innocent, locked in their happy or instructive endings, unable to change their fate and unconcerned about that lack of mutability. I picked it up, feeling its rough tapestry cover and moderate weight. Opening it sent a wave of old book smell wafting over me—the scent of knowledge and imagination. Only a handful of illustrations clouded the pages, its complier having trusted readers more than illustrators. When I was a six, the lack of pictures irritated me, but I had by now advanced literarily to appreciate the wordy majority. These were my characters; no one need craft their appearances for me. They knew me, and I knew them.

Usually sentimental about my possessions to the point of hysteria, (I felt a personality in each item, which is a sign, I learned, of synesthesia) a cool distance had been forming as I examined those magic characters. I knew that I was looking down at this book in my hands, feeling its familiar pages, reading its familiar words, but a distinct numbness kept me from actually feeling attached to it.

I came down the stairs silently, book in hand. Mom heard my steps and arrived in the bathroom to see me jamming the book in between the stick and the wall. I shoved the wood down until it was nearly parallel to the floor; its end pushed cruelly into the book, dipping the cover into concavity, blotting out the strange faces. The book no longer sat in its beautiful rectangle of space but instead twisted in a painful rhombus, its spine

pressured and turned. The contraption promised to eat my book, page by page, until it devoured the back cover.

Not a drop of water escaped from the faucet.

Mom, standing beside me, said nothing. We stared at the jimmy-rigged tub, the numb distance between my favorite childhood book and me growing more pronounced. Tonelessly, I said, "Nothing else would work."

Mom responded only by putting her arm tightly around me. She knew exactly what I felt because she'd felt it a thousand times before and would feel it a thousand times again: the overpowering, emotion-killing crush of necessity.

Part II: Cleaning It Up, Waiting for More

An Alabama court finalized their divorce in October of 1998, but the distinction seemed no more important to Kent than signing up for a buy-nine-get-the-tenth-free yogurt card. He was like an island-dwelling Japanese soldier who, cut off from mainland communication, continued fighting a war twenty years after everybody else stopped firing shots. Refusing to believe that a peace treaty had been called, he attacked whomever's head came into his scope and randomly threw grenades into the high grass for good measure. His permanent fallback method relied on breeding confusion and taking out our supplies to starve us into movement.

Meanwhile, Mom still worked to sell the house. To make up for its structural deficiencies, we had to keep it operating room clean. Apparently, you can trick someone into buying a piece of crap as long as its outward appearance is appealing. Political candidates do this all the time, so why shouldn't it work on a house?

But no sincere buyers came sniffing. Every week, we would have to vacate for a few hours so that some "interested party" could examine the property, but these prospective buyers were either professional criminals gauging our belongings and security or curious commuters that, having passed this old farmhouse every day on their way to work, wanted to know what color our kitchen was. Each time one came a-knocking, we had no more than fifteen minutes to erase all proof that people still lived there. We developed a house-showing scramble, a rush that mainly involved shoving dirty dishes into the dryer and whooshing the floors clean with my uncle's ancient leaf blower.

The first Christmas after the divorce was a fascinating combination of poverty-chic and realty veneer. Obligated to put up a traditional tree (both for her children and for the façade of house-selling Christmas cheer), Mom took us to the local Christmas tree farm to hunt down a cheap tree with at least one fluffy side; the other could be turned to the wall. A broken stand in our living room halfway contained the trunk, and we wound up nailing the branches to a corner wall to keep it upright, an idiosyncrasy that would turn into tradition.

Two more traditions also began this year: the Christmas day fight and the December fire. The fight, always between Daniel and Mom, struck up around two o'clock after gift opening but before extended family arrival. Catalysts varied, launched by anything from general holiday glumness to inadequate gifting, and these impassioned brawls marked the beginning of Daniel's wall punching habit. For this first year, Daniel's fury spawned from the betrayal of Mom sending Dad a trunk full of our pictures, as she would continue to do every year. Daniel didn't want his image mailed to a man who had once made him clear a field in hundred-degree heat with no break for treatment of a few dozen fire ant bites he'd received in an exhausted slip of foot. An annual fist-size wall hole, always in a different spot than the previous gap, became more difficult to explain to our family every year.

The December fire sounds like a nice tradition that includes roasted almonds, chestnuts, and hot coco, but No. It is Not these things. It is the antithesis of Christmas pleasantry because it destroys physical evidence of the holiday in a fit of a violent, red-orange, merciless Grinchiness. Never intentional, never on the same day, never started from the same source, the fire decorates the entire month with paranoia. Various forms of

the warning phrase "Do you smell that?" are asked more during this period than the entire rest of the year combined.

By far, the most financially damaging fire was the first.

Two weeks before Christmas, we put up decorations. Mom, as the refreshing scent of the Christmas pine began to fill our house, wrestled Dad's ancient air-popper (one of the only items he left when he moved back to Massachusetts) from the attic. She realized the cheap entertainment to be had by making popcorn in this unusual device and then stringing popped kernels on dental floss for tree decorations. My brother, myself, and our cousin Nicole jumped at the delicious opportunity and bounced into the kitchen, already slightly high from the joy children extract from putting up the first decorations of Christmas.

Just before we put the kernels into the machine, my brother decided that instead of popping boring yellow kernels we should shuck the decorative "Indian" corn, a vegetable hued with blues, greens, and reds. And we agreed, *Why not use Indian corn for popping? How pretty those rainbow strings would look on our tree!* (Note: Indian corn is a liar; when popped, it does not retain the color of its kernels but becomes depressingly white. We discovered this much, much later.)

So, in the multi-colored corn went, and we let it work as we finished hooking ornaments onto our smaller-than-usual, one-fluffy-side-only tree.

A minute or two passed, and from the living room, we heard the sounds of a successful popping through the kitchen doorway. All eyes, save Daniel's five-month-old dog's, were on the tree. Spike sat near the doorway while the decorators peered cautiously at branches because Miss Kitty enjoyed climbing the tree and attacking fingers

that reached too close. She also ate ornaments and, yes, crapped by the trunk. It was her only acceptable alternative to the attic.

Spike started barking, and Mom, sniffing curiously, coined the Christmas catchphrase: "Do you smell that?"

"Yeah," Daniel replied, a question in his voice.

I whiffed around the pine to place the unusual order. "What is it?"

Nicole, strangely, made no comment. Her silence made her stand out, so before looking around for the smell's source, all members of the Young family turned to her. She faced the kitchen. Her eyes fitted as wide as beach balls on her pale face, and several long seconds passed before Mom—the quickest of us—whipped around to face the kitchen, too.

"Holy shit!" she shrieked and sprinted towards the air-popper. I spun around, and through the doorway I saw tall flames consuming the drapes, counter, and wooden cabinets. All fire safety training I had learned through the Girl Scouts went out of my head.

"Get out!" yelled my mother's voice. I began a stop-motion run because my body, so accustomed to obeying Mom's commands, wanted to "get out" while my brain, knowing my mother was still in the kitchen, wanted to retrieve her. I reached the edge of the porch this way, mostly because Nicole, apparently very concerned about being burned alive, rushed behind me.

I started to say, "We have to do something," but Nicole, who was sixteen and prone to expletives under the calmest of situations, screamed, "Get the hell off the damn porch!"

And she pushed me down the stone steps.

Meanwhile, Daniel raced to the barn with all the speed of his fourteen-year-old legs to retrieve the container he thought best suited for fire extinguishing: a ten-gallon aquarium. As I was flying ass over teacup down the steps, Daniel was shoving the glass box under the hosepipe and flipping the water on full-blast.

In the kitchen, I would later learn, Mom one-handedly beat at the flames with an old towel while she called the fire department. When the cloth succumbed to the blaze, she filled up plastic cups of water and threw them pathetically onto the burning corner of the kitchen. Still, she managed to bark our address to the telephone operator, and loud wails started up not a mile away. She continued flinging eight-ounce fists of water and coughing smoke clouds through her lungs.

Daniel, who had run to the back door and yelled to Mom that he was coming with water, arrived at the fish prison to find it filling with an anticlimactic slowness. Impatient and panicked, he wrapped both arms around the tank and staggered upward, sloshing hose water almost everywhere and then, when he began to run inside, everywhere.

Characteristically, Nicole leapt over my prone body and ran to the furthest edge of the yard to scream uselessly. On the ground, I spat out mouthfuls of grass and knocked dirt from my knees before attempting to run back inside. Of course, I slipped on the water path Daniel left, slammed into the porch, and took several comically slippery moments to regain my land legs. By the time I staggered into the smoky kitchen, Mom and Daniel were upending the aquarium onto the conflagration. A half dozen abandoned cups littered the floor, waiting to trip distracted feet. Hungry orange flames ate their way up the curtains, through the cabinets, toward the refrigerator, nearer and nearer my family

members, who were trying to refill the fish tank. The stench of melted plastic invaded my nose and mouth, choking me worse than the smoke, promising to live on my clothes and in my hair until I died, which, according to the fast-growing inferno, would be sooner rather than later. Desperate to help, I grabbed at the floor cups, but the slickness of my dirty wet hands shot the cups across the room. Above me, having attempted a second heave of the aquarium, Mom and Daniel's momentum worked against the slickened tiles, shifting their fast feet unpredictably; the tank, still partially full of water, crashed to the ground, shattering into a projectile machine.

"Out!" Mom shrieked, her feet crunching the glass as she yanked me up. "Out now!"

We stumbled, slipped, and crunched our way to the open front door. A huge red truck was pulling in, probably guided by the still-screaming teenage girl who cowered by the road. Brightly costumed men dove from the vehicle, running past us even as they demanded answers: Was everybody out? Where was the source? What kind of fire? Mom filled them in, marking Dad's ancient popcorn maker as the source of the fire.

Mom, Daniel and I belched out smoke on the grass as they snaked a monstrous yellow hose through the door and shouted orders to each other. By the time they smothered the blaze, it had eaten our corner cabinets (and everything in them), the windowsill, the right side of the refrigerator, the rug by the sink, the old microwave, and of course the popcorn maker. The abandoned cups on the floor melted into grotesque blobs chunked with broken glass and linoleum tile. The entire house reeked of charred popcorn and plastic—not a whiff of pine could overcome the smell.

Now, a powerful image can brand itself into a mind. The sound of a scream echoes in an eardrum. A child's first touch of snakeskin sticks to her fingertips forever. No one mistakes the taste of spoiled milk. Every sense available to the human body can leave a lasting impression, but nothing in the world adheres to a person as entirely as scent. The choke of an uncontrolled blaze invades the body; it blackens the skin, penetrates the eyes, strangles the throat, crawls into the sinuses—with every breath, the particles of destroyed belongings settle a new layer of ash on the lungs and brain. The victim of a fire cannot scrub its aura away, not with Nordic glacier water or Mount Everest air, because it survives within them, and each breath that keeps the person alive infuses them further with damage.

A single experience with a violent fire—not a contained fire, for fires controlled by humans do not possess the insidious flavor of loved things smoldered—scars a permanent concomitance that supersedes mere memory. It leaves a unified mesh of that moment the extent of devastation is realized, a convalescence of the senses that no other destructive force can inflict.

In other words, fires are fucking terrible.

With my shirt covering my mouth and nose, I surveyed the polluted half of the kitchen full of unrecognizable spatulas and distorted fridge magnets. That pervasive quality of an uncontrolled combustion began to settle inside me, and as my eyes roved across the blackened hunk of popcorn maker, I couldn't help but think of my father. I thought of all the things he took with him and all those he had abandoned here. He had removed everything of real value, and what he left behind was trying to kill us.

The refrigerator survived the fire well enough for us to continue using it, although it wore heavy orange-brown burn marks on its right side. I spent hours scrubbing these spots, only giving up after the gray base color of the metal became exposed. Even then, I tried to mark up the freezer side in order to make the discoloration symmetrical, but Mom found out and confiscated my tools.

When I realized that the damage to the kitchen was out of my control, I tried to accept it, but my mind functions like a Whack-a-Mole game; knock one problem down, a different obnoxious bastard shoots up. A few days later, when riding in the car, I found that I had to slightly drop my lower jaw—just enough so that it didn't touch my top row of teeth—whenever my window passed a driveway. Reversely, I had to touch my bottom teeth to the top when outside of driveway openings.

Ticks such as this, too small and invisible for anyone to notice, ran circles in my mind, demanding attention. When I appeased them, I felt a drop in anxiety; when I ignored them, a fiercer eccentricity tended to emerged. For instance, when my friend Diana and I rode to the movies together and car conversation diverted my attention from driveways, I had to pop my door handle an even number of times before exiting the vehicle. Occasionally I asked myself, "Or what? What will happen if you scratch only one ear? Will the other fall off?" to which another part of me responded, "Nothing will happen, but do it anyway. Do it. Now. Do it do it do it do it…"

Mom and Daniel responded to stress in completely different ways. Mom's philosophy, partially based on necessity, was to work the stress away. Deadline coming up? Too many tasks to juggle? Ex-husband paying neighbors to watch you? Then

accomplish something! Make a list and crush each item. Tasks will fear being in your notebook.

Daniel, on the other hand, focused on a particular activity and became uninvolved with the rest of the world. As a child, his focuses were DinoRiders, then Pogs (collectable half dollar-sized discs), and finally Magic Cards; each phase had an accompanying fervor that made the previous thing seem ridiculous and unworthy. In junior high school, his focuses were academics and then cooking. When he loved academics, he made straight A's, started a school newspaper, and was named Student of the Quarter. When he loved cooking, he made gold out of garbage and accidentally romanced adults. But in high school, his aloof style won the attention of the elite crowd—the group that smokes behind the gym and sees who can get alcohol poisoning the fastest. Since becoming an adult and watching the world push and pull my brother around, I realized that these were not focuses but addictions; good or bad, academics or drugs, he was dependent on his focus.

Our familial combination of stresses—Mom working the skin from her hands, Daniel worshipping his collectable game cards, and me always stepping last on my left foot—finally began to concern Mom's older brother, Randall. He came over to talk with Mom about re-roofing our leaking abode and watched me walk in and out of a room three times until I could hit the last floorboard with the my left heel. Then he turned Mom around, pointed to my feet, and told her, "This kid needs a goddamned vacation."

He insisted upon it. He determined that we would, as a team, rip off and replace the damaged shingles this week, and he would take us to Florida the next week. Daniel and I would help reroof in order to save labor costs and pay for an actual hotel.

What we must have looked like scuttling around on that housetop—Mom and Randall, both skinny enough to fall through a gap between shingles; Randall's son Rick, easy-going to the point that he look like he moved in slow motion; Daniel, in the balance-damaging sway of puberty; and me, on the cusp of growing out of a kid's body and therefore probably breaking some child labor laws. Crawling along a dangerously angled roof that grew exponentially hotter as the day progressed was like playing a *Survivor*-type reality television show, only the prize wasn't a wad of cash but an unbroken leg and a ceiling that didn't collapse during the rainy season. Hot, sticky tar gummed up our clothes and the upstairs carpet because the only way onto the roof was through my or Daniel's bedroom windows. Miss Kitty, curious about our efforts, made her way up to mock us by leaping lithely all over the place and never slipping. Randall began to aim his nail gun at her until I almost fell off from shouting so loudly.

Finally, after an infinity of baking in the sun and littering the yard with broken shingles, Randall demanded that we pack up our swimsuits. As tanned and tired and sunburned as we already were, each of us diligently stuffed our travel bags and set off to Florida with the man with the iron vacation will.

Unlike our last beach adventure, we stayed in a hotel with air conditioning *and* a shower. It was *glorious*. We were almost too excited about the amenities to leave, but Randall hauled on his swimming trunks—a badly severed pair of decade-old jeans—and led us to the nearby ocean.

The weather was perfect for beach going. A golden crescent of shoreline edged the emerald ocean, as if the continent had hung this piece of Florida around its neck to wear to a fancy dinner party. This natural jewelry was studded with variously toned

human life, a glittering smash of ever-moving shoreline shells, and a pocket of gleaming silver fins breaking the surface—

"Hold it!" Mom shouted, yanking Daniel and I backwards by our swimsuits, which snapped sharply upon sudden release. "What are those?"

We squinted into the water, picking out eight or nine swooping dorsal fins. They cut the surface faster than I could with a jet propeller strapped to my back.

"Dolphins," Daniel assessed, starting forward again only to have Mom latch onto him. "Those are dolphins! Sharks don't pop in and out of the water."

"How would you know?" I asked, secretly agreeing with him.

"Shark Week on the Discovery Channel at Jason's house."

Usually, citing the Discovery Channel in our family was tantamount to calling on God as a reference, but Mom's hand remained firmly attached to Daniel. God was not a good enough witness in a shark gamble.

Meanwhile, barely outside of our peripheral vision, Randall had been making his way toward the shark or dolphin infested waters. When I turned my head, his cut-off jeans were darkening in a high wave.

"Cheese monkeys," I swore. (It was the running cuss phrase in my class that year.) I ran forward a little, halting still well beyond the crashing point of the waves. "Uncle Randall! What are you doing?!"

In his raspy, smoke ravaged voice, he shouted, "Swimming with those dolphins! You'd have to pay a hundred goddamned dollars to do it anywhere else!"

I cupped my hands to my mouth to make sure my words reached him. "What if they're sharks?"

My uncle paused. His back to me, I could feel him pondering the salty air. I thought for a moment that he would sensibly return to shore, but the moment passed, and he turned to me grinning. "Then I'll swim with the sharks." And he waded onward.

Daniel, still struggling against our mother, demanded, "Aren't you going to stop him?"

"If I tried to stop him every time he did something that could get him killed," Mom replied in a dry tone, "I wouldn't have time to eat."

We watched on tenterhooks as this tipsy, skinny Poseidon sloshed out to meet the ambiguous fins. In order to reach them, he had to swim well past the second sandbar—territory forbidden to the Young children due to the undertow, a force that, judging from my mother's seriousness, could reach up and rip paragliders right out of the sky. Randall, however, had no fear of the undertow, or anything else, really. He dipped under the glimmering waves, torpedoing for fifteen or twenty feet before he popped up closer to the horizon. The currents pushed him hither and thither, but he did not fight against them; he seemed to be a part of the tide, as willing to float as a piece of driftwood and as in tune with the sea as a grain of salt.

Still, I stood frozen and horrified, certain that I would one day tell the tale of my crazy uncle who basically volunteered to be eaten by sharks. Mom, now standing beside me, shielded her eyes with her hand and said hesitantly, "I'm pretty certain those are dolphins. He'll probably be fine."

"Can we go out, too?" Daniel eagerly asked.

"Hell no."

When Randall reached the second sandbar, the fins ominously disappeared beneath the water. We three on the beach stiffened, leaned closer, and called to our relative for a report of the situation. Randall, transfixed by something near his feet, did not reply. His head and shoulders bobbed once, twice above the waves, and then silently vanished.

No one screamed; no one did anything except stare with laser vision at the spot Randall's head had been occupying. Half a minute passed with only the Florida sun appearing on the waves. Another half minute ticked by.

As Daniel began to ask, "How long before we call the police?" Mom exclaimed, "Look!"

My eyes raked the ocean, expecting to see a detached arm or free-floating knee. About thirty feet from where Randall had disappeared swam high-jumping, beautifully silver—

"Dolphins," breathed Mom. "And there's your ridiculous uncle."

And there he was, a perfectly unbitten head, pair of shoulders, and set of functioning appendages propelling him alongside the dolphins, who seemed ecstatic to have him. The group pushed parallel to the shore, the water-goers swimming playfully and jumping circles around the flipper-less human.

They frolicked for half an hour; Mom granted us permission to swim up to the first sand bar to watch, claiming that even though the creatures were dolphins, they were still wild animals and you'd have to be a complete idiot to go swimming with them. Plus, the undertow, of course. Nuclear submarines couldn't beat the undertow, much less two kids. When we asked her where she got her facts, she said the Motherhood Handbook.

When the dolphins finally realized that Randall was incapable as swimming as far or fast as they, they departed in a friendly way. He came back to us looking wilder than we had ever seen him; his balding hair and full moustache stuck out at fluffy angles, and his skin was burned and chapped from slapping against the water. An undomesticated brightness—one that had always been somewhat present in Randall—shone large in his eyes, as if more nature than man lived beneath his skin. He was bohemian, primal.

That night, he refused to come inside the hotel room. He perched on the small balcony that overlooked the beach, and around midnight he convinced me that a bulge in the darkness was a spaceship. We traipsed down in our pajamas and sandals to confirm the findings, which turned out to be rocks, but my uncle whispered to me about what excellent camouflage that would be for an alien.

When the trip finally ended and we had to come back to our duct tape and bubble gum constructed roost, I took a slightly different view of the dwelling I had long resented. Living in this house, we weren't (as I had thought previously) civilized people living in a Neanderthal way; we were natural animals living closer to our roots than anyone else in the community. We weren't fighting the roaches and spiders that made their way into our bedrooms; we were debating biological niches. We belonged with the dolphins in the sea, and the snakes in our bathroom, and the cat shit in our attic. Organics belonged with organics.

Many aspects of my family's life did not fit in with other kids' families, including our elemental home and lack of father. For years, my friend Miley thought I was the

product of artificial insemination, and she couldn't walk around my unsophisticated home without tripping into an ER-worthy injury. However, my acceptance of our naturalistic lifestyle seemed to jar especially with the family of my religious best friend, Diana.

When I slept over at her house on Saturday nights, we always went to church the next day. I had to pack "nice" clothes—pastel colored with little to no holes—and bring a dollar for the collection plate. Diana had explained to me that church was free for everybody, which made the collection plate especially confusing. I questioned her about this paradox until she grew upset and her parents told me the money was for the underprivileged that attended the church. Again, confusing: I *was* the underprivileged attending this church.

These early ecclesiastical encounters and their accompanying paradoxes marked the first of many contradictions that would wedge me and religion onto opposite sides of a philosophical fence. Why, I asked the Sunday school teacher, would Noah get only two of every animal? Wouldn't that lead to incest and genetically inferior offspring? Answer: He was following God's will. Where, I asked the preacher, where did fossils come from? Answer: Devil-worshipping scientists planted fossils, obviously. Could, I asked Diana's parents, God create a sandwich so large that he himself could not eat it? Answer: That's blasphemous. Stop asking questions.

Every few months, Diana's family would forget how curious I was or would assume I'd learned to keep my mouth shut, and they'd bring me back to church or invite me to Vacation Bible School, a week-long craft making celebration that somehow connected secular themes (underwater, outer space, tropics, the year 3000) to Christianity. How popsicle stick photo frames related to the lessons of David and Goliath

still mystifies me, but the entertainment was free(ish) and I got to spend time with one my of favorite people, Diana.

Of course, not much time passed before my impressionable mind was pummeled with the ideas of Hell and eternal damnation. Coupled with a demonstration by The Power Team (beefy Christian men breaking stacks of cement blocks with their heads in the name of God—Oh yes, it's a real thing. Google it.), I was scared and awed sufficiently into saying, "Okay, Mr. Jesus, I'll trade you loyalty for protection against eternal torture." It felt very tribally Germanic and lasted only until I realized that hedging my bets with one belief system meant ignoring the boogey monsters of the others. Truth, not fear, should propel a religion.

Anyway, I had too many other things to worry about to concern myself with ultimate truth and the creation of the universe. Puberty began to occupy my attention; I gained weight and became more awkward and taller than ever before. Somehow, I left the knowledge of what to do with my arms when standing still back in childhood. They dangled at my sides like dead fish, and my mother's hand-me-downs, which unfortunately fit me okay, replaced my well-worn kid clothing. Almost nothing can make a recently-turned-teenage-girl feel ugly faster than wearing a middle-aged woman's White Stag jeans.

Worse, I came into fierce competition with a tiny new student named Emily. In the few years since Dad had left Alabama, I had saturated myself in academics, but Emily must have had similar troubles because she was my intellectual equal. Smaller than me, equally as well read, and equipped with threads that came previously unworn from department stores, we hated each other from our first encounter in a science class. Our

battles were waged in the realms of intellect and gender in some of the sneakiest and most malicious backbiting every seen in a middle school environment; no one saw our skirmishes, and no one spoke of them. Stealth and intricacy patterned our attacks. For example, Emily sent love notes signed with my name to Roy Snider, the grossest boy in school, so that he would distract and annoy me with loud, embarrassing queries to be his girlfriend that got both of us in trouble. In response, I would sneak fake cheat sheets into books in the Accelerated Reader Program (read books, take quizzes on their content, gain points and prizes) that Emily had just finished reading. Other students would open the books and either use the sheets only to fail the tests and harbor grudges against Emily or show the sheets to the teachers and make the authority figures suspicious of her. We were ruthless.

My run-ins with Emily caused me to be particularly aware of puberty's awkward effects on my person. Thus it was upon my thirteenth birthday that, after clomping around school in my mother's chunky loafers all day, I received birthday mail from my father.

Accompanying the Hallmark paper stamped with a kitten in a colorful party hat was a gift card to a nice clothing store I had never heard of; stores without sympathetic names (those other than Goodwill or the Salvation Army) bought real estate in the mall, and we only went there so Sears could repair our lifetime warranty-protected power tools from 1976. I pulled the gift card off its sticky rectangle to see its amount written in a stranger's blocky, neat writing: three hundred dollars.

A range of emotions filled me: glee, longing, guilt, and confusion—glee for having the card, longing for wanting to buy nice clothes, guilt for wanting to buy nice

clothes when my mother and brother were sharing our seven pairs of tube socks, confusion over why my father would send me this much money for clothes when we had trouble buying enough food every week. I both wanted to spend this money and to slap Dad in the face with the plastic.

Mom determined that we would go to the mall and use the card for me, but the moment that the violently pink clothing store came into sight, a horrible, sickening weight filled my stomach. Mom, walking beside me, knew instantly what was up and faked that a good outcome was possible.

We scanned the store, searching through the racks. It was a very nice shop. Good quality, well made. However, every shirt was printed with a picture of big-eyed teddy bear, dancing unicorn, or Barbie doll, and they did not appear to sell clothing that fit people larger than the Barbies featured. Beast of height that I was, the bottoms of any given pair of pants here would touch the middle of my calf. The loudly pink walls, styles, and attitudes were meant for children years younger than I. Nothing would fit me. My father, regardless of receiving a trunk full of pictures of his children several times a year, had no idea what I looked like.

He knew neither what size nor style of clothing I wore. He knew not whether I had boobs or a stick frame. He probably had not taken the time to look at the store. He definitely hadn't taken the time to look at the pictures. Hadn't done it in years.

I walked out of the store feeling gawkier, poorer, and more fatherless than ever.

Mom insisted that I could call him, tell him that the gift was nice but not my style or size. That he could send me anything else instead. That I appreciated the gesture, but that he, my biological contributor, was an irrevocable screw up, a careless asshole, a

miserable excuse for a human being, and I would have been better my whole life pretending a cardboard box was my father. He would have been a better parent if he had gone under the rudder of a boat and left us some insurance money. He would have been a better father dead. DEAD. Well, she didn't say most of those things, but they were *implied.*

Though many days previous to this I had disliked my father, wanted not to be around my father, was uninterested in spending time with my father, the day I received this card was the day that I never wanted to speak to him again. I was not thinking in hyperboles. I literally never wanted to speak to him again, and I was sure he had no real interest in speaking to me. We, Daniel and I, were pawns in his grotesque chess game against Mom. We were potential weapons for torturing her. He had no connection to us beyond this.

The house continued to not sell, and though Mom was promoted to work in a multi-storied building downtown, we still had little to no money. She was stuck paying the debts of the divorce for a long time, and so we lived in the realm of imaginary money where every few weeks of employment meant theoretical funds. The days felt fairly dismal. Mom was constantly on her last nerves, Daniel's addiction to Magic cards had given him a desperation and devotion to acquiring five-dollar bills, and I was organizing my books by height and color, subcategory author's last name alphabetical, and God help the family member that shelved Stanton before Levine. We were all falling prey to a host

of traumatic problems that would last for years, and the light on the horizon was as thin as our weekly funds.

Feeling the weight of our circumstances, Mom, Daniel and I rode home from a trip to Prattville behind an obnoxiously large commercial truck. I watched that truck from the back seat, my eyes bouncing as it bounced, hating how big the cargo cabin was on this narrow back road—well, hating most things, really, but that truck was in front of me, so it received the bulk of my hatred—and listening to Daniel complain about a lot of stupid and frivolous things, such as air conditioning and new jeans. As the chain on the truck's freight door flopped up and down, I felt myself falling into a trance of observation and surliness.

Somehow, that stupid truck took all the same turns we were taking and hit all the same potholes we usually hit, as if it were going to our house. Suddenly, I could feel Daniel also watching this truck; something was about to happen.

A few dozen feet in front of us, the truck heaved in and out of a particularly consuming rut and the back door, which some careless workman must have left unlocked, bounced up down, up down, and finally up up up. Daniel and I leaned forward, squinting to see the name on the dozens of badly stacked boxes filling the cargo area.

"*JETPUFFED*!" Daniel screamed, making Mom jump and me squeal with delight. "*They're marshmallows*!"

"MomMomMom! You have to follow that truck!" I yelled, my heart beating in tune to the jumping boxes of sugary deliciousness. Every glitch in the road caused the stacks to leap, lean, and lurch climactically.

"Kids, nothing is going to fall out of that truck," Mom said in an extremely leveling tone, but she had put some distance between our car and the potentially falling boxes.

"Please, Mom, we'll never know if we don't follow it!" Daniel tried to spin logic, Mom's favorite argumentative device, into his words. "What if they *do* fall off? What if half of those boxes fall out?! *What if somebody else gets those marshmallows?!*"

Our unintentional two-vehicle caravan was approaching the stoplight before our house. We were begging, using all the weapons in our arsenal to convince Mom to tail this truck. Nothing this exciting—positively exciting, not escape-your-drugged-up-father exciting—had happened perhaps ever before in our lifetimes. Mom kept telling us how improbable it would be for any boxes to fall out, and even if they did, the products inside would probably be smashed into inedible, dirty bits. We swore not to be disappointed, we just wanted to see what would happen, this sort of thing would probably never happen again, what were the chances of a marshmallow truck bursting open in front of us even if we lived right next to a marshmallow factory—

"All right! All right! Be quiet, and we'll follow the damn thing," Mom said, a smile tugging at her lips. "But don't get your hopes up. And put your seatbelts back on."

Instantly, we did as commanded; anything to follow this godsend of entertainment and hope. Even though we weren't speaking, a high-pitched hum reverberated from our bodies, like the endless echo of a note that hums through a guitar if nobody touches the strings at the end of a song. As promised, Mom bypassed our driveway in order to follow "the damned truck."

Not thirty seconds—*thirty seconds!*—after passing our home, a stack of boxes swayed too far and crashed into another equally unstable stack. Mom breaked violently as a dozen boxes tumbled from the truck and smashed all over the road, spewing thousands of beautiful white marshmallows from tree line to tree line in a storm only seen before in Candyland. Daniel and I cried to Mom to stop, stop for God's sake! Completely unaware, the trucker drove onward and out of sight while Mom argued, "Look at the road! There's nothing salvageable left! We are not getting out and scavenging the road—we aren't homeless people!"

"Homeless people," Daniel shouted, "don't scavenge for marshmallows, they scavenge for anything they can get! We are just taking advantage of the circumstances!"

Incomprehensibly frantic, all I added was "Marshmallows!"

We were mutinously serious about hunting the roadside, and finally Mom saw our determination. She flipped the car around and parked at the edge of the marshmallow scatter zone, declaring that we'd better not get hit by any cars and we weren't going to find anything anyway.

But she was wrong.

Daniel dove into the fluffy wreckage while I examined the perimeter. Almost immediately, I heard him shriek in triumphant, and he held up an undamaged bag of Jet-Puffs as proudly as an Olympic gold medal. He cried, "There's boxes of 'um right here!" and his body disappeared into the ditch. Meanwhile, my excursion of the marshmallow/grass line was turning up armfuls of beautifully airtight bags right beside their collaterally damaged brethren. I stuffed as many intact bags into my arms as I could before waddling back to the car so I could store them and pick up more.

Mom's shell of pessimism cracked upon witnessing her children's success, and she threw herself into the search. She helped Daniel scoop up three untouched boxes, knowing that there was no way of returning them, and loaded them amongst my pile of single bags. By the time we finished divesting the road of its accidental bounty, the station wagon held so many marshmallows that Mom couldn't see out of the back window.

For months, we ate these glorious treats, having obtained so many that we had to overload the freezer with fat bags. When guests came over, we didn't offer them drinks or chips; we thrust handfuls of name-brand marshmallows on them, opening up the freezer to show them our incredible surplus and retelling the truck story. Our friends listened in awe, popping puff after puff into their mouths but never putting a dent in our supply. The marshmallows were our family crest, our logo, our symbol of hope and karma and optimism; everyone at school knew us as the Marshmallow Kids, and everyone knew that the name wasn't a derogatory comment on our weight but a celebration of our fortune. We were the skinny Marshmallow kids!

Even when times got tougher, the weather harsher, and money tighter, Mom, Daniel, and I could eat a few marshmallows and feel better about the world. The badly loaded Jet-Puffed truck was a stroke of extremely implausible luck that gave us optimism in the darkest period of our lives. Marshmallows made life worth living.

At a half past three, Mom's station wagon pulled up to the school slowly, possessing none of the urgency with which a late car would normally be vested. She sat

with her hair wildly askew, her clothes pressed with dirt, and her smile weary and fake. A gray, ashy smell rolled off her, invading the rest of the old family car like an unbathed army.

When I questioned her current state, she said, "Let's wait for Daniel," and pulled further down the road to retrieve my sibling from the high school. The smell worsened as we drove; I felt it weaving into the fabric of my jeans, curling around in a binding way that promised to stay forever. The odor knew me, and I knew it: fire.

Several Christmases had passed since that first spectacular fire. Though the flames had vengefully returned to take the house, each attempt had manifested in the form of a small, manageable blaze: an extension cord spitting sparks onto the wooden floor, a holiday candle tipping over onto the table, a firecracker shot into the pine straw around the house, and so on. The freakishly warm winter we had been experiencing should have clued me in that Fire was ready to try again. It had simply been testing the water before.

Concerned in the regular teenage way about appearances, Daniel flew into the car upon noticing my mother's shabby state. Instead of asking about her appearance, he said, "Go, go, go!" His friends looked curiously onward as Daniel hunched in the front seat with his backpack still on.

Unperturbed, Mom drove at the normal school speed limit, although she did avoid the gaze of the teachers directing traffic.

"Well?" I demanded, scooting to the limit of my seatbelt to lean into the front. "What happened?"

Mom sighed and ran her fingers through her dark hair. The simple movement pushed the powerful smell of burned logs into my nose. Daniel shifted uncomfortably.

"I was trying to burn a pile of brush in the field," said Mom. One hand sat on the steering wheel while the other supported her head from the narrow door ledge. "I had both water hoses out back, I had the fire confined, I was being really careful, but I heard the phone ring in the house and ran to get it. Two freaking minutes later I walked outside and there were flames," her fingers splayed wide and swept the car from left to right, "everywhere. The wind had blown my small brush fire to another part of the field. I shot water at it, but it was too far away. I had the phone in my hand, so I went ahead and called the fire department *because I didn't want it to get out of hand.*"

The last part she said with an ironic tone, and I wondered how the field would look when we returned home. If we still had a home.

"So I waited. And the fire got bigger. And I waited more, still trying to put it out and failing. And the fire got bigger. And more time passed, and I heard the fire trucks, but I couldn't see them, as if they were circling the house without pulling into the driveway. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes—I called the fire department back, still hosing down the border of the fire in a fruitless attempt to keep it controlled. *Where were the firemen*, I said. *I need the firemen*, I said. *Well*, she said, *they came back to the station because they couldn't find your house.* I said, *Really? Here's a landmark for them: It's the one with the great big fire behind it!*"

Daniel, smushed into the front seat with his attached backpack, interrupted, "Do we still have a house?"

"Yes," Mom answered testily, "because I left the field and ran into in the middle of the street to flag down the second wave of fire trucks. They said they could see the smoke but didn't know how to get to it, so they just went back to the station. Just went on back!"

The car pulled onto Coosada road, and we saw a weak trail of smoke crawling its way out of the trees near our house. It could have been an early campfire or chimney smoke, harmless and comforting, but a heavy wave of dread washed into my stomach; I had well learned the foolishness of optimism.

Daniel and I approached the field slowly; the thick fence of unseasonably lush greenery separating the field from the backyard had survived the flames, creating the illusion that nothing had happened on the Young property that day. Deep tire tracks that led into the woods and a chaotically unraveled water hose were the only signals of upset. However, the entrance to the field, which was wide enough, apparently, to fit a fire truck through, revealed a picture of devastation.

The longish grasses that had once given the field a beautiful meadow aura were charred to the ground from one edge of the field to the neighbor's pines; the ground was a photograph of cooked rice noodles developed with inverted colors. Three or four fern tree carcasses hung in various states of foliage death; one had completely collapsed upon the ground and burned into black sticks while another had fallen onto itself and spared its topmost leaves from the flames—an odd flash of green in a black-and-gray wasteland. The single fern tree that had escaped the fire clung to the edge of the forest, its closed fronds drooping as if in mourning. A lone oak seemed, from a distance, to have only received darkened bark as its wound, but approaching this victim revealed its exposed

charcoal root system. Wildflowers had completely disappeared, burned into unrecognizable dust, and the small garden we encouraged every year was equally ashed. Dormant bushes of wild blackberries, our favorite free summer treat, had burned into oblivion. The entire field smoldered slightly, and small whirls of dust plumed up wherever feet met earth to produce suffocating burn smells.

Behind us, Mom said in a cheerful tone, "It'll grow back twice as lush!"

Because he had started kindergarten early, Daniel was the last of his friends to get his driver's license. Before he turned sixteen, he had been on the verge of troublemaking constantly. When he finally hit the legal age, our grandfather, whom we called Pawpaw, gave Daniel his ancient silver truck and the keys to my brother's Hell years. They weren't Hell for him but for Mom and me. Daniel rarely got into trouble that he could get out of by himself.

He stayed out late, slept all day, and became a regular ward of the police for a rainbow of standard teenage infractions: underage drinking, underage drinking in public and accosting a fast food employee, possession, riding in garbage cans while friends pulled him from the passenger seat of a car, etc. Daniel wasn't doing anything worse than anyone he went to school with, but he coupled his crimes with terrible luck. The boy always seemed to get caught.

In addition to taking out his temperamental angst on the physical structure of our already sub-par house (a row of fist holes spanned the living room wall in an almost artistic arch), Daniel made a hobby of starting crazy fights with Mom. She would request

that he do a single chore, and he would explode in a fiery rage that took out kitchen chairs and sent the dog running through the gap in the toolshed door. The fights always ended in the driveway because Daniel's fury would become too great to communicate solely through spitting screams and smashed furniture; he had to slam himself into the car and spin out of the yard whilst blaring rap music. He drove somewhere unknown, waited half an hour, and sped back to scream some more. After a while, Mom packed me in the car after Daniel left so that we could sidestep his second rant; ice cream was our usual trip, so listening to Daniel get mad had a reward system for me. It was a delicious fight sequence.

A key phrase signaled the start each of these episodes. Daniel would slam something down and then roar, "*God FUCKING damn it!*" I heard it one day after many months of listening to him say this exact thing; Mom and I were upstairs cleaning the attic, and I had heard him raging so often that the event didn't scare or startle me. I sighed and said, "I guess it's God Fucking Damn It Time," and Mom collapsed into laughter, which Daniel did not appreciate when he came up to shout. From then on, whenever the sounds of a Daniel episode first reached us, Mom and I whispered that God Fucking Damn It Time was upon us. Sometimes when we became frustrated and need to vent to each another, we entered a room with the announcement that "It's my God Fucking Damn It Time now!"

After he graduated high school, Mom and I experienced a month-long calm period because Daniel decided to go to Texas with his high school buddies. They packed too many teenage boys into Daniel's firebird and set off with a single cell phone. Mom

remained torn between the fear that they would never return and the hope that that they would never return.

No late night phone calls marked this month; no screaming fights, smashed furniture, fists through walls, no badly concealed pot odors or eardrum-bursting music about various bitches and hoes and their unfortunate romantic decisions. I had friends over without worry of my brother episodically shooting everyone because my buddy George called the broken DVD player the "damn broken DVD player." I spent entire nights not having to make frightening decisions about intervening in the anger fits downstairs. I lived without writing journal entries like the following dateless excerpt from my old computer logs:

> *Awakened to GFDI Time and numerous slam whams. Rose to consciousness with a mostunwilling tug. Windows dark as the surrounding walls, so struggled out of covers to see the clock at feet. Had I even heard anything at all? Had that been a dream?Slowly, the blob of clock light began to shrink into digits. Four thirty? Four thirty AM? More unhappy shouts. An entire flight of stairs, a ceiling, a hallway, the door to my bedroom, and a deeply pleasant REM sleep cycle did little to muffle the noise. Sunk head back into soft, screamless pillows. Noise continued until four fifty. AM. Birds aren't even awake at this hour.*
>
> Morning—*Discovered the source of commotion. It was the toaster. It had burned his toast.*

During this month of inactive familial craziness, I began to hate my sibling. Naturally, I didn't really hate him; I just vacillated between enjoying the peace of this vacation and listing grievances against him—silly things like how he made me late for

school because he had fallen asleep in the shower *while taking a shower* and how he threw away every metal fork he used until I was left eating my salads with takeout chopsticks. These were small infractions that my mind fixated upon for days until I finally ripped up my floorboards and shrieked, "Villains! Dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!"[1]

When he finally returned, looking even little wilder and thinner than before he left, I listened to his stories about Texas. He told me all about a midget village in the middle of nowhere, and how Ian hooked his hitch to the gate and ripped it off as a trophy. He described the beautiful transvestite who had tricked their drunken friend into going home. He guffawed over waking up alone in the desert with no idea how he got there or how to get back. He went on and on with thrilling stories, leaving out the seedier details because he did not want to expose me to grimmer realities, and with each irresponsibly themed anecdote, I realized that he would always be capable of slipping into God Fucking Damn It Time. It was not just a state of raging anger but a selfish, consequence-dismissing mindset that also lived in our father.

Much worse than delivering bad news is prefacing bad news. When someone tells you one of those softening-the-blow phrases, you have anywhere from five to fifteen seconds to contemplate all the world of horrendous things that could have happened—and, as all the best artists demonstrate, the power of imagination is far worse than the

[1]*I did not say this; I have determined not to lie to you, readers, and I confess that these are the words of Allen Poe's "The Tell Tale Heart" (8). Though I may have borrowed the words, the frenzy I felt was original.

power of reality. If you must give me bad news, tell me immediately so I can deal with it immediately.

My severe dislike of drawing out bad news is why I rarely introduce terrible material. I sound abrupt, certainly, but whatever I have to say sounds only as horrible as it really is. As an example, here is an actual bad news intro that I heard a parent's friend give her one day: "I have something to tell you. I don't want to be the one to have to tell you this, but I think it's best if you know now rather than finding out in a few days. Last night, as your brother was driving home, he was really tired and hit your dog on the street."

After hearing only the first sentence, my mind has constructed the following possibilities:

1. Someone has died: mother, brother, grandparent, aunt/uncle, cousin, friend, fellow student, the president.
    a. Someone was in a car crash and is now a vegetable: mother, brother, grandparent…
2. Someone is in jail: usually someone to whom I'm related.
3. Someone is in the hospital for any number of terrible reasons: base jumping gone wrong, meningitis outbreak, swallowed a magnet that is now stuck in throat, leg severed by boat propeller, set on fire by welding machine, falling wall crushed entire body, hysterical sadness, pushed out a third story window: these are all things that have actually happened to people I know.
4. Someone accidentally threw away important tax information: I was always hopeful for this one because the worst that can happen is a little jail time.

If I were to convey the above news, I would use the following format: "You're dog'sdead." Simple, direct, absolutely no anticipation. The nurse doesn't tell you she's about to stab you with a needle, you don't wonder how much less it would hurt to yank the bandage off, your family's alive, no one's in jail, and you aren't exhausted from the Emotional Roller Coaster of Possibilities. Here's another example of a bad news introduction I heard a different friend's parent give her: "Aunt Elsie kicked the bucket." Who: Aunt Elsie. What: Dead. Other possibilities to horrify you in the seconds before the sentence ends: None. This man knew what to do, as did my mother.

"I have to tell you something unpleasant," Mom began, maintaining direct eye contact and tilting her head minutely downward in a super-serious manner. "Rick died yesterday."

Rick, my oldest cousin. Rick, Randall's son. He wasn't a decade older than Daniel.

The very use of the hard word "died," rather than the gentler terms "passed away" or "is gone," implied intent, as in Rick was not killed second-hand because a drunk driver hit a deer that flew across a highway and smushed Rick on his motorcycle. "Rick died" meant that the death could be blamed on nobody but Rick. Rick was not "killed" or "in an accident" or "ran afoul of a pack of wolves." Beneath the shroud of genuine grief on her face, Mom was both unsurprised and furious.

These facts spun through my head in the time it took to draw and release one steadying breath. I felt myself nod unfocusedly and ask, "How?"

Since I was now a teenager and no longer in need of mental shielding, Mom was anxiously debating what facts I should know and what facts would haunt my sleeping

hours with grotesque images. It was like watching someone balance on the middle part of a seesaw while holding a wobbling bucket of nitroglycerin in each hand.

"Nobody is sure yet," she admitted, tilting to the side of her balance board that regarded me as her child. "But," she added, swinging a bucket on the opposite end of the seesaw for counterbalance, "the consensus right now is a drug overdose."

What kind of drugs? Where was he? Who was he with? Who found him? Where is his body now? How long has he been dead? How did you find out? Who else knows right now? When will the funeral be? Is anyone else dead that we simply don't care about?

A long list of questions swept through my head, but I asked only one: "How is Randall?"

Grim lines of trouble settled across my mother's forehead, and, as the trend had been for years, her lack of a partner meant that I filled the role of confidant—a position I mostly reveled in and only slightly dreaded. The adult edge of that seesaw smacked the ground.

"I don't know that he'll survive it," she admitted. "He's…inconsolable. Unreachable. I think—"

She sucked in a breath and swallowed. "He feels like it's his fault. Fathers and sons should not do drugs together."

Rick had held a special place as the first grandchild born into the Cobb family. He was also my mother's first nephew and, thus, probably the one to whom she was most attachment. She related stories to me about taking Rick for small adventures as a child, sneaking into abandoned siloes at dusk, stuffing him into her raincoat in a surprise

downpour, outrunning hobos at a New Orleans riverfront—adventures that taught her the line between what was exciting to do with a child and what was dangerous. Daniel and I probably would have had a lot more fun if Mom hadn't had the experience of children before us, but, then again, we probably wouldn't have complete sets of fingers either.

Rick's death should have had a therapeutic effect on my sibling, staying him from drugs and danger by the evidence of how damaging they could be, but it had the opposite effect of depressing him so much that he sunk further into that dark, hallucinogenic world. Having run in a similar drug circles together, Daniel became obsessed with the idea that he could have saved Rick. He began acting even more wildly, making his old actions look like the pranks of a schoolboy.

Finally, after having been awakened to retrieve Daniel from a Georgia jail at half past midnight on a Sunday, Mom gave up. She called Dad, forced arrangements on both men, and stuck Daniel on a plane to live with Kent.

Nobody expected Randall to outlive his son for very long; his death a few weeks later was the fall of an axe that had been hovering too long. He, like his son, was cremated, and in a streak of the redneckery was bagged up in a couple of Ziplocs with Rick. Most of the family accepted this fate—both the suicide and the Ziplocs—with a quiet, dignified sadness.

But then there was my younger cousin Nathan.

Nathan is famous in our family for two things: a tireless ability to perform physical labor and a tireless inability to cope with death.

The first funeral Nathan had ever gone to was Rick's, and I'm pretty sure the shock of actually attending this type of event as a kid kept him silent and frozen in disbelief. In fact, his unwavering calmness, dry eyes and quiet countenance lulled the rest of the family into an extremely false sense of security—one that assumed Nathan could deal with death through contained sorrow. However, Randall's funeral, so close on Rick's heels, revealed my cousin to be a flailing, wailing griever.

All was quiet in the funeral home. Since Randall had been cremated, there was no viewing portion of the funeral, just good old fashion staring at a box in front of a podium while some ancient deacon that nobody (including the deceased) has ever met talks about Jesus. My family and I, segregated into a special spectacle room that sets up the people crying hardest on a display for the rest of the attendees to observe, passed tissues quietly down the rows. Silence was important because the elderly speaker's voice had all the carrying power of a butterfly, and every time someone tugged a tissue against the thin cardboard opening, we missed an adjective about God or Randall, and I was really interested in what this man who had never met my uncle had to say about him. Mom held back a sneeze so the deacon could label Randall "caring;" Pawpaw suppressed a cough so the deacon could remind us God was "glorious." All seemed as well as a funeral can be.

But like the sound of a tornado that can be mistaken for a harmless train, the noise of Nathan's aggrieved tears began to rise above the family's subdued sniffles. Because he sat in the near middle of the room, the acoustics of the arched ceiling bounced back his cries, which seemed to make him cry harder. Tissue boxes passed his way from every direction, and we shook our heads sadly to indicate how hard Nathan was taking

Randall's death. *Poor kid*, we thought as water bottles and gum and Werther's candies followed the Cobb Hands Funeral Trade Route to Nathan. *He's taking this really hard.*

The deacon continued speaking, glancing every now and then toward Nathan because everyone was. He remarked on how God heals all wounds in time, and Nathan let loose his first caterwaul. The deacon paused a moment to let the wail go by before he continued speaking, but Nathan's lungs possessed a superhuman amount of oxygen; the man could only pause so long decently. Nervously looking out on his audience, the deacon raised his wobbly voice and continued sermonizing.

Perhaps it was the very fact that the speaker spoke on when Nathan was so clearly afflicted with emotions that made my cousin's song of sadness escalate to an orchestra. His loud, gasping breaths became the only intermission between his tortured wails. I saw him in the row behind me, sandwiched between his mother and father. They appeared to be hugging him tightly while actually attempting to stifle his clamorous grieving; he began to rock back and forth, clutching an unused wad of Kleenex and rocking his parents with him—no small feat as the boy's nine-year-old body weighed a little over half what his mother did—and his cries derived momentum from his movement so that a rise in one naturally meant a rise in the other.

Meanwhile, the deacon had finished speaking and, looking mildly insulted, stepped away from the podium to allow time for attendees who wished to speak. Someone else climbed up and began to talk very, very loudly while attempting to maintain the natural cadences of human speech; it proved an impossible combination. He seemed to be shouting at us, ranting about how "RANDALL WAS A GREAT MAN AND UNFORGETTABLE SPIRIT!" and that "HE'S HAPPIER WHERE HE IS NOW." He maybe

recited some Italian poem about the peaceful beauty of death, but we couldn't pay proper attention and he wound up sounding like an angry New York butcher ("*IL COSTO DELLA VITA E LA MORTE!*"). The man didn't possess the ability to talk at full volume and keep his sentences declarative.

Somewhere in the middle of the poem, Nathan became a machine of perpetual anguish sounds; every outpouring of breath was sacrificed to the gods of Wail and Howl and every intake had to be carving out pieces of the boy's lungs. Hyperventilation made the sounds faster and more frantic, and as my cousin's immeasurable misery cascaded through my ears, a simple sentence of Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway rang true: "Human sympathy has its limits" (135).

An uncontrollable spasm of giggling overtook me.

It was ridiculous! He was ridiculous! Behind me, they were binding my cousin up in men's sport coats to act as a makeshift straightjacket so they could drag him from the room, and he was bawling, sobbing, one hundred and ten percent inconsolable.

Mom's hand clamped down on my wrist, and I realized she, too, was laughing as silently as possible. We leaned into each another, holding Kleenex over our noses and shaking with suppressed giggles, hoping that onlookers would assume we were crying aggrievedly. The louder Nathan got, the harder we laughed.

And then the worst possible thing happened: Sissy took the podium.

Sissy, an ex-girlfriend of Rick's that clung to him and our family long after their relationship ended, had, at Rick's funeral, delivered what was probably a eulogy. Nobody could really tell. It was an outbreak of incomprehensibly sobbed English-like words, and her 1980's style glasses had sat largely on her face, magnifying her tears and thus further

distracting the audience—because that's what we were at that point, an audience. Even though she could only make humanish noises, she refused to be led from the podium until she bawled all she had come to say. For her day job, she worked as a Mexican restaurant called *Cucos*; in English, the name means "cuckoos," as in "crazy as a cuckoo bird." Her name, Sissy, is actually a nickname. I've known the woman probably two decades and still have no idea what her actual name is.

No other soul at that funeral but Sissy would have called direct attention to Nathan, bound and fighting with the will of a rabid raccoon as five grown men bear-hugged him toward the exit. His eyes nearly rolled in their sockets, and Sissy cried out dramatically, "That boy right there understands the power of love!"

The fifty heads that had been politely ignoring Nathan turned with complete social permission to stare as he bit his father (accidentally, but who would know that?). Matthew, the father, shouted a curse but didn't let go of his son. Sissy continued to rave into the microphone about the depth of grief, and she got halfway through a sincerely inappropriate story about Randall skinny-dipping at the lake before the same drag-away crew from Rick's funeral hustled her out the door.

Exhausting and hilarious, Randall's funeral played out much like his life: completely unpredictable, socially unacceptable, and genuinely unforgettable. Afterward, when we were safely outside of the funeral home, I said to Mom, "I don't know how Nathan did it. I have never felt that powerfully about anything in my life. Ever."

We shook our heads, intending to call Jean, Mom's sister and Nathan's mother, to see how he was doing, but we saw a man approach my grandparents a few yards away.

He wore an appropriately sad expression and nice clothes. Nanny and Pawpaw watched him carefully.

"I wanted to let you know," he said, taking Nanny's hand in a comforting way, "that a few weeks ago, Randall walked in during the middle of Sunday Service and told the congregation, 'I want to join your club.' I think he knew that something might happen to him in the near future, and he wanted to make sure that he was right with God. I thought it might comfort you to know that Randall's soul was saved, and he's happy in Heaven right now."

Of course he knew something was going to happen; he killed *himself.* I felt a rush of irritation at the man, wondering if he was lying, trying to collect followers in some obscure way, or if Randall really had decided to place his bets with Jesus. But my grandparents did seem more at ease knowing that Randall and Christianity were square.

Still, I watched the stranger as we prepared to leave the funeral. I was certain there was something suspicious about him (there wasn't). That is why when Mom shoved a box into my hands, I took it with surprise and no protest.

"What's this?"

"Randall."

"*What?*"

"Jean was supposed to take him, but she had to leave with Nathan. Hide him quick! I don't want Mom and Dad upset!"

"*...what?*"

"Hide Randall! Quick! Go!"

She gave me a small shove toward the car and turned to capture Nanny and Pawpaw's attention. *I always knew I would have to hide a body*, I thought as I scurried to the vehicle. Popping open the back door, I lifted the hinged seat bottoms and stored Randall in the wide hidden compartment; his box looked small in that big space. I only just closed the seat when Nanny walked up behind me and asked to sit down.

"In here?" I croaked. "In the back?"

She gazed at me with some concern. "Yes, dear, right here. I have to sit. This had been the longest day."

"Okay?" Respect for a dead body and the desire to not upset my grandmother warred in me as her bottom closed in on top of the exact spot that I stashed Randall. I could think of no excuse. I let her sit. Randall's raspy chuckle ghosted through my mind; he would have loved this.

Naturally, Pawpaw came up with Mom and also wanted to sit in the backseat. Mom had neglected to tell me that we would be driving them to the church for the memorial luncheon. Vocal paralysis arrested my throat as I realized my grandparents would ride seated atop of their dead son for a good seven miles. They must have chalked my silence up to situational depression.

Mom climbed in the driver's seat and took off. A thoughtful silence filled the car. My family was thinking about the recent deaths and how to properly deal with them. I was thinking, as Mom took a turn with a little speed, if we would hear—

Thunk.

Yep. Randall sliding around underneath the seat.

"Jean—R-randall—Terry—Laurie," wavered Pawpaw, going through his usual list of names before he arrived at the correct one. "What was that?"

"SPARE TIRE!" I shouted instantly, making Mom jump. "There's, uh, a spare tire loose in the trunk."

"Oh. I can fix—"

"No, that's okay!" I interrupted. "I…want the practice."

Pawpaw, who specialized in cars and small motors, was startled enough that he didn't argue.

Thunk.

"You should," I said, feeling a tad lightheaded, "you should maybe take turns slower."

Mom, moderately amused, knew exactly what—err, who was thumping around. She did not slow down, later telling me that she wanted to take Randall for a last fun ride. He *thunked* and *thumped* at every turn, making me wince before and after impact.

Afterward, instead of removing my uncle, we kept him in the car for a few weeks. He had always enjoyed traveling, and just because he was dead didn't mean he had to stop being himself.

Death puts most people to thinking about experiencing life and accomplishing goals while time allows them. I supposed that is how I wound up in California with Kent and Daniel.

I had barely talked to Dad in six years. He sent the occasional birthday gift—sometimes with a card, but more often with a yellow post-it bearing the obligatory "Happy Birthday" in a fast scrawl—and we were forced by Mom to talk at Christmas. But Daniel and Dad were planning a trip out west, and I was invited. Actually, invited is too cozy a word; I was summoned.

So Mom boarded me on a plane that would meet up with Daniel and Dad in Texas, where we would get on another plane and fly to California. I was sixteen and had flown only once or twice before, but the woman beside me was pushing forty and had never been within spitting range of an aircraft. To solve her sky jitters, she decided to get very, very drunk and befriend me by talking about all her greatest fears. She described dying in a plane crash in elaborate detail, and she described it every twenty minutes because that's when she got a new drink. When we had to circle the Texas airport for an hour due to bad weather, a bout of hysteria overtook her and she passed out. I did not try to rouse her.

By the time I finally met up with Daniel and Dad, I had spent three hours being squeezed for comfort teddy bear-style and twenty minutes dashing through an unfamiliar giant of an airport to catch a flight that was supposed to leave at the same time my first plane touched down. Lucky for me, Dad bribed the crew of the second plane to wait. I would say it was one of the nicer things he has done for me, but I later learned that Mom, keeping track of the flights on the internet, called and forced him to help me. (Note: I would later learn that just about any nice thing he did for me was at the point of Mom's sword. Gaining this knowledge was akin to Wiley E. Coyote running off a cliff; as long as he doesn't realize there is no cliff beneath him, he can keep on chugging, but the

moment he looks down, gravity yanks his ankles. The difference between this cartoon character and me is that once *I* had been flattened into a pancake, I could not re-inflate myself by blowing on my thumb.)

Dad was capable of bribing the crew because he was the owner of a very successful communications business that he started clandestinely back in Alabama; he could have owned one of those money swimming rooms coined by Scrooge McDuck. Mom, Daniel, and I didn't know about his business for years because he put it in his mother's name so that he could claim he had no income and thus pay no child support. Although he was completely aware of our living conditions in Alabama, he preferred to fund a trip to Nova Scotia for his friends than to make sure his children lived in an insulated home.

These are a handful of the bitter thoughts that coasted through my head during this trip.

An entirely different category of concerns swamped me when I saw my sibling. He leaped out of his seat and gave me a really satisfying, bone-crushing hug, which was a remarkable feat because he was thinner than a fence post. I don't know how his muscles managed the action or how he was walking around. Bloodless skin, hollow face, and gaunt appendages, Daniel looked like a chemo patient with a great attitude. As I sat beside him, he wouldn't stop smiling. Dad, too, sat beside me and smiled, but his had much less sincerity to it.

As I stared at my father's thin face, I realized that he and Daniel seemed to be victims of the same parasite. Dad also possessed a pale, sunken face and withered limbs. Was he a vampire, or the victim of a vampire? Did they catch that Oregon Trail disease,

cholera? Were they fasting? Had they giving up eating solid food? I didn't want to ask, fearing that the very recognition of their condition might startle their weakened bodies into shock or simultaneous heart attacks.

But I only had to wait until the end of the flight to develop a hypothesis. The instant we stepped off the plane, Dad and Daniel parked me at Baggage Claim so they could go outside to smoke. Daniel, in all his years in Alabama, had *never* smoked; he took the cigarettes from his jacket pocket with a shameful sort of defiance aimed at me. Dad, before walking outside, glanced at me and started to tilt the pack in my direction, as if he were about to offer me a stick, before Daniel caught his eye and shot him a death glare. And suddenly I saw it as clearly as I saw Daniel's malnourished arms: they had discussed this moment before they met up with me. Daniel had instructed Dad not to give me additives. Daniel didn't want me to be end up the way he was.

With them living together, Dad had pulled Daniel into his world of hourly alcohol and illegally obtained substances. They looked the same because they did the same drugs—together. Father and son. Just like Randall and Rick. Who were both dead.

I swallowed these thoughts. I had no proof. It was all conjecture, but I watched my brother carefully for the rest of the trip, hoping that I wouldn't find evidence.

Each day that we spent together, Dad's extravagance grew so infuriating that it became a loudly tolling buoy on the ocean of my consciousness. I was on a tour called Kent's Limitless Money Fun Time Extravaganza. He bought all three of us separate rooms in the nicest hotel I've ever seen. The only time a nicer hotel has existed is in a movie called *Every James Bond Villain Meets Jay Gatsby and Bill Gates*[2] where all the richest people in the world decide to spend their entire fortunes building the world's most

[2] This movie does not actually exist, but it really needs to.

luxurious hotel. It has mattresses made of live concierges, automatic backscratching toilets, floors built from Faberge eggs instead of tiles, rooms full of dejected-looking poor people for guests to walk by and scoff at, and wood-burning fireplaces just for keeping piles of money warm. At home, I was stuffing packages of frozen vegetables into my daily swimsuit outfit to stay cool in my own room, but here I could dine on an eighteen-dollar box of raisins from my own minibar—which, by the way, was stocked with the world's most expensive alcohol. I could have lethally poisoned my skinny sixteen-year-old body three times over with the stash in that fridge, yet nobody said boo.

I possessed a contradictory disposition during this trip. I was outraged by the amount of money my father was spending on luxuries and wanted to boycott his frivolity—he knew that at home we fed ourselves on damaged canned goods from a backwater grocery store in Slapout—but I also knew that I would probably never have the opportunity to experience this city at this socioeconomic level again. Settling for a state of resentful enjoyment, I explored San Francisco with a permanent anger line on my forehead but wore an insuppressible smile; most certainly, strangers thought I was mentally deficient.

Unaccustomed to such vacations, Daniel and I felt that this trip had some mysterious underlying purpose. Long before, we'd learned that our father did not dole out happiness and fun freely; stipulations and strings hung like invisible cobwebs, waiting to give the unwary child a face full of pissed-off spider. Daniel, who had been living with the man for six months, had a permanent spider bite on his nose. This trip, we realized on day three, was no exception.

Dad had allotted this day to drive to Muir woods, home of enormous and unforgettable redwood trees—trees so ancient that onlookers grew older from gazing at them. On way to the woods, we drove by large eucalyptus groves and stopped at what seemed to be a random pocket of trees.

Without any preamble, Kent said, "So, this is where I grew up."

Daniel and I looked at each other; nobody had ever given any indication that Dad had grown up outside of Massachusetts. He had gone to school and graduated there. His family lived there. We had been born there. Not a single Young family member had even hinted at a California upbringing.

"I've never told you this," he continued, pinching a eucalyptus leaf and crushing between his fingers carelessly, "but Demos is not my real father. Your grandmother married him when I was nine. Before that, we lived here in California with my biological father."

Feeling stupider than usual, I chewed on this information for a moment; what did it really mean? That Dad was a liar? (Duh.) That Pops, the only member of my paternal family that I enjoyed spending time with, wasn't actually related to me? That I had an entire grandparent I'd never known about? The soothing scent of cool eucalyptus was keeping me calmer than I should have been; I wondered if my father had planned it this way.

A faster processor than me, or perhaps a quicker temper, Daniel demanded, "Why didn't you ever mention this before?"

Dad's hands went into his pockets, the only indication that he felt even slightly uncomfortable or defensive about keeping this information from us. "It's my personal

business; it's got nothing to do with you two. I don't think about it much, or talk about it, because it's not important to me. Your mother seemed to think that you should know. I think that a person makes his own path; heredity has very little to do with who someone is. It doesn't change anything or matter."

"I guess that's true," I heard myself say slowly. The words were the exact opposite of how I felt; the very fact that he had withheld the truth for sixteen years—nineteen, in Daniel's case—meant that it was pretty freaking important. In fact, the information wasn't nearly as disturbing as the length of time it took him to finally reveal it. And then he brought us to the spot he grew up to reveal the reality—if it didn't matter, what was with the ceremony? This was just one more secret that Kent Young kept and spooned out at his leisure, waiting to strike at the opportune moment to damage whoever his target was.

But I said none of this; I didn't mean to say anything at all, but my mouth was on autopilot as my brain spiraled around the consequences of having an invisible grandparent. My mouth asked, "What was his name? Where was he from?"

Kent had anticipated these questions; his voice had an arrogant tone—the one he used during fights in order to make his opponent feel inferior. His mouth pulled to the left, and he made that careless *eh* sound. "Genealogy isn't very important to me; I think it's pretty useless, really, so I don't know or care where he was from. His name was Richard Langley, and people called him Dick."

The past tense struck me. "What happened to him?"

"He died a few years ago. Heart attack or liver disease. He was an alcoholic."

A few years ago. He was alive when I was alive. He probably never knew I existed, never saw his grandchildren's faces.

"You don't seem sad about it," Daniel noted.

Kent shrugged. "He was a bad guy. Slung us around as kids when he was there at all, drank and did drugs constantly, I don't like to talk about it."

Psychologically torturing your children, I thought angrily, noticing the way my brother's clothes hung loosely on his skeletal frame, *is so much better than hitting them.*

The following day we visited Alcatraz, which was a fitting type of historical site for us to visit with our controlling father. It was an especially eerie place, and not because of the haunted dilapidating prison or the morgue that would have made a perfect serial killer nest. The freaky thing about our visit was the large groups of tourists silently shuffling from building to building because they had all purchased the audio tour; nothing is quite as unnerving as standing in an abandoned prison mess hall with forty other people *who aren't saying any words*. You know that they are not being quiet because the grisly historics of the facility are dampening their enthusiasm to a miserable hobble. You know that each of these people has a voice whispering in their ear about the activities that once went on in this room and the valuable contribution that preserving the enormous tin cooking pots has made to modern society. And you know that these people have not been possessed and/or zombified by poltergeists, but your subconscious doesn't give a happy damn about facts. It demands that you tap the stranger beside you on the

shoulder and say, "How about those solitary confinement cells, eh?!" just so you can be reassured by a confused look that informs you they are still human.

Aside from visiting creeping historic landmarks and monitoring my brother's health, I had one obligatory task for this "vacation:" scattering some of my uncle's ashes in the California wilderness. Doing this was my mother's idea, and it was perfect. Randall would have loved it.

Since we suspected that a variety of laws prevented the transportation of dead relatives on airplanes (although we never checked for the sake of plausible deniability), Mom and I scooped the rectangle of silver powder out of my eye shadow compact and filled the void with a few teaspoons of my uncle. Slightly edgy about my suitcase being dropped and the world's tiniest coffin exploding all over my clothes, I contained Randall in his second Ziploc sandwich bag.

Daniel and I took this small setup with us on the day we went hiking along the shoreline with Dad.

Fountains of wildflowers covered the meadow that we stomped through. Whether or not the area was a legitimate public hiking place made no difference to my father, but I suspect that we parked in an accidental bald spot beside the road and struck out. In any case, the cove looked untouched by man; the flowers and tall grasses sway up to a steep pile of variously hued boulders that demanded climbing. We three scaled the rocky hill like mountain goats, possessing no fear and a primal desire to reach the pinnacle, which offered a heart-stopping view of the Pacific.

When our sneakers hit those top rocks, Daniel and I both knew that this was the place to release Randall's ashes into the free Pacific wind. Dad, who had been Randall's

friend for much longer than I'd been alive, approved of our plan, although if he hadn't, we might have pushed him from the cliff.

I set my pack on the ground, rummaging around water bottles and Band-Aids until the cool slip of Ziploc brush my fingers; pulling Randall out, I handed the container to my brother. He protested slightly, insisting that since I had brought the ashes, I should release them. I shook my head, certain that my sibling needed the catharsis of ash sprinkling. Finally, he gently took the container and unzipped it.

However, when he tried to open the eye shadow compact, the latch wouldn't budge. Since my brother had never before had cause to open a container of makeup, I shouldn't have been surprised, but he was having an unnatural amount of trouble. Attempting to instruct him without actually touching the container, I explained about pinching the sides and popping the indentation with his thumbnail, but he merely gripped it harder and swore louder. Exasperated but attempting to maintain the dignity of ceremony that our mission required, Daniel finally whipped out his pocketknife and pried the top off.

Click! Finally, the bottom separated from its top. Daniel stood high, looking quite regal as his shorts flapped in the wind and his shirtless ribcage bounced the sunlight, and he said, "Welcome to California, Randall," in a softly religious voice.

He opened the container fully, and the wind whirled Randall's ashes from their vessel to smack against my brother's naked torso, covering him as if he'd shimmied down a chimney.

"I guess Randall's saying he'll never really leave you," I said before I could stop myself. Dad, standing further away, looked halfway between amusement and revulsion.

Daniel, who was usually easy to disgust, just smiled and brushed our uncle into the sunset.

When I got back home, I thought I was done with death for a while, and to a degree I was correct. I got almost two years of funeral-free living before death reached up and slapped me in the face.

Diana, my old friend, had moved to Florida with her military husband. She left her religious parents, Kay and David, who I loved dearly (even though I disagreed with their Sunday habits). Kay was, in fact, my mother's best friend. David had been ill when Diana left, and he seemed to be getting sicker as time went on. He called me sometimes to come over and chat, and we would sit together while we ate lunch and told stories. I wasn't especially concerned with his health; he had been sick for years and did not appear to be in any serious danger.

One night, Kay called me. David had been feeling particularly under the weather, and they ran up to the hospital to get him checked out. Kay had forgotten David's cholesterol medicine and asked if I could bring it to them—a common sort of errand for me since Diana had left. I swung by their house and arrived with that small pill container in my pocket about half an hour after Kay's call.

When spotted Kay, I waved. She waved. And then all hell began breaking loose.

A group of nurses wearing serious expressions ran past us into David's room. Ten different types of alert sounds burst through the briefly opened door. One tall doctor with a hefty beard dashed in after them, sending out another wave of alarms.

"What's happening?" Kay asked, slightly panicked. She was looking at me.

"I—I don't know," I answered.

"Ma'am, you can't go in there," chastised a surly nurse as Kay's hand touched the door. The remark hung like the Roman pronouncement of a Coliseum event; Kay spared the nurse one vicious glance before diving with all her weight onto the handle, and the nurse (reading Kay's movement in the glance) dove toward Kay. She looped her arms around the waist of my best friend's mother and shouted, "We'll tell you when any news is available!" which is a phrase usually spoken in comforting, soft tones to an eager listener. I didn't realize how much comfort rested in the tone before hearing the words yelled at the same volume that nurses demand, "Get the restraints!"

They scuffled in the hallway until pairs of fast-moving scrubs began jumping in and out of David's room with the most confusing series of reports: David's fine. Actually, he's not. We have to take him to another hospital. He's fine. He's dead! No, he's not. We're transporting him to Birmingham via chopper! We can't! He's dead! We're sorry! What'd you fall over for?!

Not many seconds passed after the first "dead" pronouncement before Kay's legs went out. A few of us in the hallway caught her, and the nurses directed me toward a "quiet room;" I (125 pounds) dragged Kay (125 pounds) across the sterile tiled floor and deposited her on the couch. She didn't see me. She didn't see anything. She had turned inward.

Promising to return as soon as possible, I left her in the room with a nurse and paced the hallway while I called Mom.

On the first attempt, I got her voicemail.

On the second attempt, I got her voicemail again.

On the third attempt, I screamed "PICK UP THE PHONE!" before the voicemail started recording my message, for which I was later thankful.

On attempts four through seven, I walked the line of cheery blue tiles from the quiet room (on which I kept an eye so Kay couldn't escape or wander off) to the vending machines at the end of the hall (which marked a corner that would have put me out of sight of the quiet room.)

My hands shook slightly by attempt nine, probably because I realized that no matter how many times I hit redial and listened, my mother's cool voice would always tell me to "leave a message, please."

Mildly frantic, although keeping the calmest appearance I could in case Kay looked at me from the door, I changed tactics and called my brother. He had moved back a few months before and was potentially in the same house as my mother. The sound of his voice on the other end brought a blissful warm wash of hope to my stiff and still-in-shock body.

"Listen, Diana's father David is dead. I came up to the hospital to bring him his cholesterol medicine, and he died five minutes after I arrived. I have to get Mom for Kay. Can you wake her up?"

After the sickeningly silent three second pause that followed my request, Daniel need not have even answered, for I knew what he was going to say.

"I'm sorry, but I'm over here at Bobby's and I've been drinking pretty heavily, and I don't think I can drive back."

I never ask you for anything, I screamed in my head. *Couldn't you have been helpful for a single night?! You are the opposite of an emergency contact!!!* Aloud, I heard myself say, "Nope, that's okay. I don't want you getting into an accident or hitting anybody. Enough's been done tonight already. Thanks anyway."

To his credit, he sincerely apologized multiple times before hanging up and multiple times in the following days, but an angry little goblin in my skull was hurling rocks against that block of emotion and necessity that follows sudden death. That goblin, a manifestation of my animosity, had just concluded that I could not rely on my brother for anything, ever, for the rest of my life. (I must mention that in a few short years, he became a responsible and reliable person, but at that moment I wanted to beat him senseless with a baseball bat.) Yet I could barely hear the goblin shrieks over the mudslide of panic and grief roaring down my frontal lobe.

I can't deal with this, I told the universe, although the chances that I said it aloud are high since the young nurse beside me jumped. *THERE'S NO WAY I CAN DEAL WITH THIS. Oh, god, I have to call Diana. All of these people can't know about her father's death before she does. But must take care of Kay. Must contact Mom. Mustn't leave hospital...mustttard....*

Fully aware of the breakdown of my own mental faculties, I took a deep breath, concocted the simplest plan I could, and punched the number of my ex-boyfriend Thomas, who lived sixty seconds from our house.

Predictably, he sounded surprised to hear from me, especially since I started the conversation with, "I am so sorry for what I am about to ask you to do."

But thank God for Thomas and his good nature because he listened carefully, didn't interrupt me when my voice cracked on the words "David's dead," and consoled me with only one extremely sincere sentence before hanging up to rouse my mother by knocking on her bedroom window: "Call me if you need anything else, and, Lacey, I am so, so sorry."

The dry click that severed my lifeline outside the hospital sounded terrifying and wonderful. Help was on the move although I could not stay on the line with it until its arrival. Slightly saner now that I knew *something* was going to happen, I slid my phone back into my pocket where it bumped against David's untouched cholesterol medicine. Though I had been absent from the sparsely but expensively furnished quiet room for no more than three-and-a-half minutes, I was extremely nervous about what I would find.

The nurse had given Kay a fistful of tissues and cup of water, both of which she ignored. She sat small and pale and shocked on a brown couch, and the tissues kept falling out of her hand. The nurse scooped them up without comment. Kay's unfocused eyes wafted from the nurse's face to mine.

"Mom is coming," I said in my most reassuring voice. "She'll be here in a few short minutes."

Wispy life drifted back in her cheeks, although it was faint. She nodded at me, held her hand out, and we sat hand-in-hand until the nurse re-entered several minutes later with ice chips, the doctor tagging along behind her.

In that brief and yet infinitely long time, all Kay said to me was, "It can't be. He can't be dead. They're wrong."

Reassurance. That's what she wanted from me. I could see the need in her eyes. But the deepest, oldest part of me knew that I could not give it to her, knew how much worse it would be to give her false hope. So many people could have said comforting things at that moment. Someone better with death could have delivered the truth with a grain of hope, perhaps sprinkled with some Christian comforts. But she didn't have someone else; Kay had me, and all I could say, with a toneless voice, was, "I don't think they're wrong."

The post-ice chips doctor confirmed my words. Something had ruptured, something usual had done else something unusual, it was all extremely unforeseeable, and he was so sorry for our loss. David was gone.

Since I already knew David was gone, the part of this pronouncement that struck me the most was my inclusion in the grief. The way the doctor had said "your loss," looking at both me and Kay, held an implication. And suddenly my brain replayed the words the nurse had said when I first came back in the quiet room, though at the time they were spoken I heard them as radio background noise: "Your daughter is back."

The hospital workers thought I was Kay's daughter, and I was struck by an immediate, powerful need to keep up this pretense. I'm sure I looked guilty as soon as the thought struck me, but since I wasn't technically "family" in the legal sense of the word, I might not be allowed to stay with Kay. The hospital staff did not know how important it was for Kay, who had always been an emotionally fragile person, not to be left alone. My mouth opened and closed like a fish, but the doctor was too busy explaining and apologizing to notice.

My phone rang; Thomas had reached my mother. She was speaking to me in a groggy voice on her way to the hospital, asking if David was really dead, not believing he could be gone. She was certain I was confused about what I was saying. She was skeptical, just as she had been the time I developed hives during the movie *Chicken Run* because of the freezing theater, and she couldn't believe that *that* was the reason. It took years of allergizing my appendages in our artic winter house for her to conclude my wisdom to be true.

When she finally arrived, Kay wrapped herself up in my mother and, under the protective shield of her closest friend's body and spirit, began to speak again. She called Diana, David's family, and her pastor, all while using a high-pitched voice that was very much not her own. Nobody that she called could believe her, and before long, the quiet room was full of loud people, offering comfort and asking questions. I called Diana, desperate to extend to her some of the comfort present in this room, but it went to voicemail.

An hour passed before she called me back. She asked me what had happened exactly, and I explained it to the best of my ability. With many shocked pauses, she told me that she and her husband were driving home with their new baby that very night. I was to make sure her mother knew because Diana did not think Kay had understood the message. I assured her I would comply.

Silence arrested our phones for a long minute.

"I'll stay on the phone with you," I offered sincerely, "the entire drive."

"I know you would," Diana answered kindly. A question hung on her end of the line; I could tell she needed to ask or say something, probably lots of somethings. I didn't rush her. I just listened to her breathe, and time went by.

"Were you…" her voice broke. My heart cracked. "Were you…there? With Mom?"

I had to swallow before answering. "Yes. I was."

The softest sigh blew through my speaker. "Thank you."

"Always," I said.

And without closing our phones, we both put them in our pockets and went on to other things.

Part III: The Shitting Never Dies, Even After the Cats Do

Though I can't recall the last time I consoled someone with the "Everything is going to be okay" bit, David's death was the event that stopped those words from ever leaving my mouth again. Even when I read this paragraph aloud during my proofreading stage of writing, I ignored the quoted material and became confused that I was talking about horses and mouth bits. It was worthwhile confusion.

I badly wanted to tell Kay that the situation would turn out all right, but I really had no idea. I certainly didn't want everything to not be okay and have the evil forces of the world make a liar out of me; outside of this thesis, I lie enough as it is. I don't need bad mojo helping me. Anyway, this emotionally exhausting interaction with Kay began a new habit in me that nobody appears to have noticed. Instead of giving out advice catered to the individual asking for it, I barf out either startlingly unhelpful tidbits or tired clichés. The unhelpful comments include things like, "It's very unlikely the plane will explode," and "If he's cheating on you, then just stop loving him. He doesn't deserve it." The person with whom I am speaking will either become irritated with me, develop a new fear, or think I'm brilliant. If they arrived at the last possibility, they say something like, "You get right to the heart of the problem! How do you see things with such clarity?" and I always answer, "It's easier to understand the situation when you're not involved in it," which is bullshit. The truth is that I have nothing to lose in the game of Somebody Else's Life, and that makes me invincible to their problems. I can't feel the consequences of the ridiculous solution I just gave!

For those times that I answer in clichés ("What does your *heart* tell you?" or "Go with your gut" or "Misery loves company"), which of course are meaningless and stupid,

whoever is listening to me suddenly thinks that I am the wisest person they have ever met. I am not assuming this egotistically; these people literally tell me I am the wisest person they have ever met. Perhaps I subconsciously reserve the clichés for stupid people, and I dole out the preposterous advice to people I know can take it.

Now, if you're reading this and I have given you advice in the form of a cliché, don't worry. Sometimes I spit them out when I just can't think of a proper response to whatever you said. You might have said too many sad things in a row, like my old middle school buddy Dexter James who had a fresh batch of the most miserable coincidences in history to tell me about every time I ran into him. Or you might be a weird-ass who steers every conversation—even ones about church bake sales—back to their sexual discrepancies, like my high school friend Anony Mous.

Before my new habit gained me infamy as a genius or an idiot in various circles—before David's death even, high school graduation crept closer, and college lurked on my horizon. To most young minds, the idea of college contains a glorious potential, a righteous emancipation from all the constraints of authorities that have enforced curfews, inflicted groundings, withheld car keys, sequestered television, and, in general, closely policed a life. I learned about this manner of thinking from my friend Shannon, who held romantic idealizations of collegiate life close to her heart; she could talk for hours about the parties, fashions, and experienced love interests that awaited us graduating intellectuals. To her, we would be goddesses of youth and beauty, draped in robes of freedom and easily obtained alcohol, eating grapes peeled by lovers of our hedonistic lifestyles. Our academics would nearly drown in a flood of expensive material

possessions garnered via a surplus of student loans, but we would study just enough to continue leading the flashy college life.

Several things held me back (as they had always held me back) from dreaming as Shannon dreamed. The main two were my economic disadvantages and familial circumstances; in other words, I was poor as shit, and if I left, my family life-destroyers would eat my mother alive. Daniel had ended his stay with our father in a glorious, blazing fistfight that had been on the verge of happening for years. Kent had always needed a good ass kicking, and Daniel had always need to kick Dad's ass, so I think it relieved a lot of psychological pressure for both of them. However, my brother would not turn into the responsible, self-possessed man that he is today for several years, and in the meantime he continued to antagonize Mom and me and basically anyone who did anything that he disliked. That encompassed a wide range of people.

The day he called to tell us he was coming back, I talked to Kent on the phone for the first time in months. We exchanged frivolous pleasantries and updated one another on our lives (he didn't mention the fistfight). He waited about ten minutes before he told me that he had been heavily into some genealogical work.

"I thought you said genealogy was useless and didn't matter?" I asked him, remembering almost these exact words coming from his mouth in California.

"I never said that," he replied in true Kent style. I didn't bother calling him out. It wasn't worth the fight. He continued talking about our complex family history, and I began to joke about what my real last name should be. After all, before my Greek step-grandfather Pops (Demos Young) married my grandmother Nana (Barbara King), he changed his last name from Anacopolis to Young in order to escape persecution. But

Nana's Italian mother (Julia) had been married twice, changing her last name from Trabasso to Rueben to Trabasso to King. But Kent's real father was Richard Langley, so my real last name should technically have been Langley—Lacey Langley. However, Richard's family (we later discovered) had also changed *their* last name to escape some persecution, and their original last name was the very Irish O'Casey. So, at the end of the day, my real name should be Lacey O'Casey. Mom cannot say it without adding "shamrocks and shillelaghs" in an Irish accent.

I'm fine with Young. All this name switching cat shit in our family attic could stay right where it was.

Anyway, my college problems still worried me. Abandoning Mom to the bottomless wells of rages and selfish violence that could attack anyone in our gene pool would earn me a well-deserved seat in Hell. Reality afforded me no room for collegiate dreaming. Plus, most of the problems that afflicted my peers—breaking curfews, sneaking out, getting caught vandalizing condemned buildings—were so off my radar that I didn't know they existed. Our family troubles necessitated that I be responsible, and some of my failed relatives served as glowing demonstrations of the Wrong Path.

Still, hopeful that something would change—maybe Daniel would conk his head and become the state's problem or I would win a Georgia lottery that I'd never entered—I applied to Auburn University, home of the tigers and Lacey's wildest dreams. Yes, my *wildest dreams* were to go to a college less than an hour away from home and probably commute there for a year and then—the possibility was too tantalizing to fully consider—find a way to *live nearer the campus*. As a fallback (I told myself this phrase hopefully), I also applied to Auburn University at Montgomery, knowing I could safely get in with my

high ACT scores, stupidly high GPA, and status as salutatorian, but I was loathe to go there. Attending AUM meant living at or near home and being on call to deal with Daniel and Kent and jailed cousins and all manner of middle-of-the-night emergencies. AUM meant four more years of dealing with insanity. There was nothing wrong with the school itself, just its location relative to my relatives.

And yet I wound up there, and I'm glad I did. I'm glad because I have no way of knowing whether or not I would have made something of myself at Auburn, whether I'd be deeply in debt right now or happy, whether I'd be married or a business major. I'm glad because going to AUM taught me more about academics, relationships, and personal interactions than I could have learned anywhere else. Moreover, I couldn't leave Mom with Daniel and Kent, who could do just as much damage a thousand miles away as he could down the street. The odds of success and sanity would be stacked against her.

When my friends asked me why I decided against going to Auburn, I did what I always used to do when questioned about my personal life: I lied. I didn't want anyone, even my closest confidants, to know about my family's embarrassing fights, financial troubles, or mental illnesses. For years, I had successful hidden my obsessive-compulsive tendencies and replied to personal queries with sarcasm instead of sincerity. Time had made me a master of answer avoidance and on-the-fly fibs. When they said, "Why not Auburn?" I said "Too expensive." The lie was based in truth, as the best always are.

Of course, I enjoyed many fun and illuminating experiences at AUM, liking searching the grounds for a series of "hidden tunnels" that were supposedly used as political safe houses…er, safe tunnels. Many a day passed with me getting into heated

intellectual discussions with business majors over how to spell "Shakespeare." In fact, I completely gave up on religion on a couch in the AUM cafeteria.

I had been sitting with my boyfriend, Tray, and my slightly off-kilter friend Karrie. Tray and I, both easy-going people, were enduring Karrie's heated opinions on why a certain series of fantasy books was a jumbled rip-off of four other series of books. Karrie had heated opinions on most things, but this was today's topic. No other students sat near us. We weren't bothering anyone, and no one was bothering us. I would like to emphasize how unobtrusive and unremarkable we were being.

Out of the blue, a stocky African girl with long, beautiful braids popped up beside Karrie.

"Hell-o!" she said in a wavy accent; her voice flowed like the swirls in a mahogany table.

"Hi," we three replied cautiously.

She flashed us a smile full of bright, white teeth. "May I have a moment of your time today?"

We looked at each other, then back at her. Tray, our unintentional spokesperson, answered elaborately, "Yeah, I guess."

"A-thank you," she said, shuffling further toward us. I noticed a thick binder clutched in her hands, but one of her sleeves was hiding the cover. She had to be selling something. "Have you accepted our lord Jesus Christ as your savior?"

Whaaat?

Tray, who had attended many a youth group activity at his Christian high school, shrugged and said, "Sure, yeah."

I, too startled to say, "Hey, that's kind of a crazy rude question to ask us in the cafeteria," instead said honestly, "I'm on the fence."

Karrie, however, unleashed her opinion in a polite whiplash: "No, I'm an atheist."

"Oh," said the African girl, "Then you are going to Hell."

"Well, that was quick," I muttered to Tray. Karrie stared at the girl as if she were a cow trying to do math.

"I can't go to hell," Karrie said matter-of-factly. "It doesn't exist."

Our heads whipped to the African girl like we were watching a tennis match.

"Hell exists, and you will go there, and your body will forever burn in its fiery pits while the Devil inflicts tortures upon your mind, never allowing you rest or recovery from the endless reign of terror and pain. No sunlight will reach your face. Only the burn of Hell's everlasting fires will touch your skin, and there will be no sanction from the misery…"

She went on for a few minutes in this vein while Karrie watched her blandly. Finally, when the girl seemed to exhaust her supply of hellacious devil imagery, Karrie leaned forward a little. The African girl looked defiant, ready for Karrie's counter attack, ready to slap away any facts Karrie might throw at her with descriptions of demons and hell dogs and skin melting (and I guess skin regrowing, because how could you be burning forever if your body parts didn't grow back to burn again?). With the tiniest flick of her hands, Karrie let loose a psychological bomb that landed right on that girl's face with two uninflected words: "You're wrong."

"I am not wrong." That seemed to be it at first. She gathered herself to her full height, glaring at Karrie and flaring her nostrils. I thought she might walk away, but she

shook her head and announced, "There is no hope for you. Your soul is lost, and you will regret it as you—"

"Burn forever, dogs of hell, eternal damnation, yes, yes, I know, thanks." Karrie nodded at her and took a sip of her Coke carelessly.

The beads in the girl's braids clacked furiously as she turned to me and almost shouted, "*You* can be saved! There is hope for you! You can still accept Jesus Christ as your lord and savior!"

I felt uncomfortably spotlighted. "Um, I don't really believe in that stuff either."

"Now is the chance to see truth!"

"Well, what are the benefits of joining?" I asked.

"Joining?" The word threw her off for a moment, but the very act of asking her a relevant question had her hopeful. "To not burn in the fiery pits of Hell. To feel the love of the Almighty God."

"How would I know that you are right?"

"Because it is true!"

"How do I know it's true?"

"Because it is! That is why we have faith!"

"So I should have faith in…having faith? That sounds like a bad idea."

Her eyes narrowed suspicious at me, and she said, "I can see that you are not ready to accept the light. I only hope another agent of Christ finds you before your end." She ripped a sheet of paper out of her binder and flung it on the coffee table before storming away. The paper was advertising a Christian rally later that week.

"Man, that girl was pushy!" Tray said.

"She was pushy because she was wrong," Karrie replied. "You don't have to be pushy if you have the truth. I didn't have to use any scary descriptions about fake torture chambers to tell her about my beliefs. I have facts. She has bullshit. Christianity is a nightmare, and hell is the boogie man."

Karrie had expressed these sentiments before; in fact, I had heard many people express these ideas, and I had heard many people express that African girl's ideas, too. I was twenty, and both arguments had spun around my head so much that this day, in this college cafeteria, I had made a decision.

"I have made a decision," I announced dramatically to two people who cared so little about the subject that they had already changed the topic to how weird feet look. "I have decided that I am undecided."

A brief silence. Karrie, of course, broke it with an opinion. "That's not a decision."

"Oh, yes it is!" I wagged my finger at her happily. "Because I have decided that both sides are wrong. Believing that fire-and-brimstone jive is stupid, and believing in nothing is stupid as well. I can't prove either of them, and so it is finally clear to me that everyone is wrong and I know nothing."

"Science can prove—" began Karrie, but I cut her off.

"And history can prove that human science has been wrong before. I am perfectly happy knowing that we as a race are idiots, and we might have some of the truth, but we definitely don't have all of it. Therefore, I am officially undecided."

"So, agnostic, then?" asked Tray.

"No." I thoughtfully shook my head and drank some coffee.

"But you literally just said the definition of an agnostic person," Tray remarked.

"I am a new thing."

"You're not."

"And it is called 'undecided.'"

"It isn't."

"And I invented it."

"You didn't."

"I guess history will tell us who the true not knower of known truths isn't, then, eh?"

"I didn't understand any of that, but I'm sure that it won't."

We hadn't been up to Mom's middle sister's place in years; Pam had kept a beautifully landscaped trailer in Slapout. Instead of a fence, Pam grew sour apple trees along her lawn, and the property was just far away enough from civilization that animal tracks always patterned her backyard. She had started having children at a young age (Rachel, the cousin from our first Christmas fire, was her eldest) and continued having children well after her siblings stopped. Currently, her two young kids lived in the trailer with her, and Rachel had recently moved a second trailer onto Pam's property to raise her own brood.

Since Nanny and Pawpaw were aging, Pam demanded that the family hold Thanksgiving at her home because it might be one of the last opportunities we had to get the whole family there.

I searched for the dwelling as we turned onto the long road, hoping to catch a first glimpse of those beautiful apple trees.

But I did not see trees. In fact, I did not see the trailer or my relatives or grass or cars. All I could see, from the road into infinity, was garbage.

Every inch of Pam's once pristine yard was stacked with giant mounds of junk. By "junk," I do not mean a random compilation of gifted trinkets that are stored away and displayed only when the gifter comes to visit. I do not mean the accumulated knickknacks that a family picks up from yard sales and souvenir shops. I do not mean a jumble of second hand goods, a cluster of odds and ends, a knot of miscellaneous items, a lot of broken down cars to salvage useable parts from, or a bundle of objects that someone might pick through and purchase. I mean somebody saw this place and said, "Mother of God, we could make a television show about cleaning up this huge pile of shit," and he sold the idea to A&E under the title "Hoarders." That's how astounding this mass of garbage was; it superseded its own repulsing definition and began to act as a muse for creative-minded passersby.

As our car closed in on the wasteland, children began to emerge from the mess like those disgusting mutated sailors on Davey Jones' ship from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. They materialized from various points and stacks with their clothing retaining the mishmash style of their background. All their garments were worn and dirty, stained and smeared until they could have been completely camouflaged when standing still in the yard. Skittering toward us, we recoiled in horror as if a cast of Steven King characters were closing in on us.

"Ant Laurie! Ant Laurie!" they cried, swarming the car and pressing their dirty faces against the windows happily. A few directed the car onward to a parking corral that had, as my relatives had arrived, retained all the order of exploded bomb shrapnel. We rode between two large structures that turned out to be trailers hidden behind walls of trash, and a thick orange cord had been draped from the roof of one to the window of the other. The earlier arrivals had avoided parking beneath this mysterious rope—definitely the wisest course of action.

The children pulled us from the car and led the way to an opening in the refuse landscape with cries of "Follow me!" Indeed, we had to follow them because the garbage mountain, as it turned out, had been crafted out of necessity into a garbage maze with a piecemeal plywood floor. The plywood made the ground solid enough to walk on, and why the hell the ground wasn't solid enough on its own was a reality that I will spare you the full details of by summarizing in two words: septic tank. The serpentine maze paths wound through innumerable broken televisions, disintegrated food boxes, rusty swing sets, discarded baby toys, splintered hunks of wood, smashed plastic jugs, overstuffed Hefty bags, fluff-leaking comforters, and—*suddenly*—hoards of dogs. We hooked a right at some abused sneakers and a dozen small yappers were on us, running so thick on the ground that every step was a chance to snuff out a tiny life. They might have found us sooner, but several generations of inbreeding had created a particularly stupid collection of genetics; the dogs rarely found their way to the end of the maze.

By the time we staggered into the equally as junked up interior of the trailer, I had to shake the smaller dogs out of my pant legs and recover a shoe that a brave group of them had attempted to confiscate. So busy in the dogfight that I didn't notice I was

even inside, I ran into a ceramic mermaid that bounced gently off an oversized stuffed horse, and I mistakenly apologized to a life-sized cutout of John Wayne while my cousins laughed at me. Yeah. *They* were laughing at *me*.

You may or may not know that trailers, especially heavily lived-in trailers, are not the most temperature-controlled dwellings. This was and wasn't a problem in this home; Pam's trailer had long lost any centralized heat and air conditioning. Instead, they warmed the facility with a wood burning fireplace situated on the living room carpet. The method was effective only because the overwhelming wall-to-wall rubbish hung so densely that it acted as an insulator.

When the time finally came to eat, I became dizzy on my way to the kitchen because there were no horizontal planes for my mind to recognize and translate into gravity. I tripped drunkenly to the kitchen, winning amused jeers from my uncles about my ability to play sports, and commanded my eyes to figure out what was food and what was…other. What I normally assumed to be a sterile environment—counters, the sink, plates, the general cooking arena—was, in this place, perceived to-tal-ly different. Someone could walk into this kitchen and ask two questions: (1) Can I put flammable things in here? (2) Can I store open containers of rotting food on top of flammable things in here? Yes to both, and screw you, life without E. coli!

Daniel, Mom and I stayed inside the bare minimum of time; how that place hadn't already collapsed and killed everyone was scientific glitch.

We walked with my cousins, secretly hoping to find the outskirts of this garbage city, but none came. No fresh air was to be had. Inhabitants could only take deep breaths of decaying wood and dog shit and—well, let's face it, probably child shit as well.

Rachel's three girls under the age of four roamed the dump, and none of them cared for diapers or toilets. Watching them was like watching an aboriginal population on an undeveloped island. I just…I can't…there isn't…just *garbage*. Everywhere. All these children knew in the whole world—a world full of disinfected offices and pristine white glaciers and crisp mountain air—was this filthy, sprawling testament to the wasteful and lazy modern human. I felt inspirationally appalled, like William Blake watching a scrawny kid shimmy up a chimney.

Near the rear of Pam's trailer, a gaping hole had opened; it dipped about seven feet down and had a fat PVC pipe sticking out near the top. I did not have to wait long to discover the function of this concavity because my sweet little cousin Ashley saw me gawking at this child hazard and asked proudly, "Do you want to see our waterfall?!" and I, thinking of a charming naturalistic feature in the woods, replied, "Of course!"

We did not go to the woods; instead, she led me to the pit and, ushering me to teeter dangerously over the edge, pointed to the pipe. "You can't tell right now, but when we run the washing machine, the water pours out in a bubbly gush! You want to see it? Hey, Ray! Turn on the washer!"

"Oh, no no, sweets," I said, squinting toward the line of green algae striping the bottom of the pipe. "You don't have to do that. Believe me, I can imagine it just fine."

Unaware that my answer was cloaked in horror, Ashley skipped along and dragged me behind her because the list of things to show me would never end because the wasteland never stopped growing because the government was funding this atrocity with food stamps and Welfare. Little did the country know it was paying for the welfare of rats, not people.

She brought me to a large area that at first I assumed to be an oddly symmetrical pile of more crap. But then the sun shifted a centimeter lower, removing the glare that had kept me blissfully ignorant. In front of me, standing tall but invisible behind Rachel's trailer and parallel to Pam's, was a third trailer. A third trailer even older and more rundown than Pam's—the one insulated by thick layers of *stuff*. A third trailer that had been sawed in half. Lengthwise.

"Why is—uh—how did—er—what are you—uh—" My mind couldn't imagine a question to ask. The presence of this beast had destroyed my ability to form interrogative sentences. I *love* interrogative sentences!

"We're going to attach it to our first trailer!" Ashley exclaimed delightedly. "Some people from the church donated it to us, and all we have to do is take off this here wall." (She gestured to the nearby wall of Pam's trailer, the one that the ceramic mermaid had leaned against.) "We'll have two kitchens! And five bedrooms! Ray's going to make one into a gun room…"

She continued talking, but I couldn't hear her. I realized that the Lacey of two minutes ago had thought the trailer was another pile of junk because it was full of piles of junk. *MORE JUNK*. Junk inside the other junk. If I hadn't started fighting my OCD the previous year by wearing mismatched socks and purposely askewing balanced pictures, I would have been foaming at the mouth and seizing on the soggy plywood. The ambulance would never find me. My bones would forever rest by a bashed-in VCR and two empty Twinkie boxes.

"That's nice willbefunforyou," I stammered, and began to lurch back toward the first trailer. The time had come to leave.

I roused Mom, who upon seeing my face immediately claimed I looked ill and that we should go. The children followed us out and warned not to touch that dangling orange cord that hung like a jungle vine. When Mom asked what it was, they replied that it was the power cord by which Rachel received electricity in hertrailer from Pam's because Rachel's wasn't hooked up to any official power lines. I made a choked sound and jumped in the car.

When we reached the end of the driveway in a thoughtfully horrified silence, the only words spoken were a phrase of awe from Mom. "They live there," she said, baffled, to her steering wheel. "They *live* there."

Because I was still living in the house/shack that had been not selling for years, I often griped about the living arrangements. The floor had too many splinters, the wind blew through too many unsealed cracks, the roaches scurried in through too many infinitesimally small openings, etc. After we came back from Pam's house, I shut straight up. The only aspect of our home that I would continue to grouse about was fleas.

We have had fleas (thanks to cats and dogs) in many times. I dealt with them because the alternative was burning down the house and starting over with arson charges. So we sprayed that disgusting fog poison all over the place—this meant spraying chairs, couches, beds, tables, floors, loose clothing, poor floor fallen objects, decorative dishes—and were driven *from our home* for two or three hours while the poison dissipated to a level of toxicity that wouldn't kill us. This process killed some of the fleas, but then there were the bastards that were immune to the fog. Those tiny mothers bred and made new

fleas that were also immune, so we got different poison to kill them, and the process continued until the fleas got pissed off with our persistent attempted murder, packed their tiny suitcases and hopped off to new hosting ground.

It seems like a simple process, but there was always a terrible in-between time when the fleas were resisting and I would absently scratch my head, wondering, "Is a flea going to jump out of my hair onto the person next to me?"

During this stage of flea removal, I developed a paranoia where I would be languidly speaking to some third party when suddenly my eyes narrowed to slits, darted to my pants leg or sleeve and I violently—and quickly—seized a hunk of my own flesh between my fingers. My capture of a flea generally was recognizable by me eliciting a low Mr. Burns cackle from the deepest part of my abdomen while an escaped flea was recognizable by a mumbled stream of swear words through my gritted teeth and the tiny, high-pitched laughter of the flea.

Every night during flea times, I found myself in my underwear, balanced on the narrowest edge of my bed, visually patrolling my legs for small moving black specks. If found, the offending flea would be seized and dropped into a bottle of water that I swore to remember not to drink this time. It was usually at this point that I thought, "If I tell someone this story, it's going to have to start, 'Armed with a water bottle, my legs stretched and twisted out like a cricket's as I watched bugged-eyed for fleas…'."

Months later, when a warm, bloomy spring evening had birds settling in their nests and the mimosas closing their fronds for the night, Nanny called. Her voice was so

panicked and loud thatdespite my being on the other side of the kitchen, I could hear her first words projecting from the tiny speaker against Mom's ear.

"Your father is missing!" she exclaimed, followed by some more softly verbalized explanations that couldn't reach me. Mom's mouth formed a grimmer and grimmer line as my grandmother spoke, so I started to put on my shoes over my pajamas. By the time she hung up, I was coated, shoed and walleted, ready to hunt down my grandfather, but Mom surprised me.

"I'm going alone," she said. Disbelief halted my feet on their way to the car. We had been tracking, calming, hiding, soberitizing, tackling, and policing crazed relatives for years; we were an efficient and unorthodox team, paired up to fight against situations that should never have been and definitely should have never entangled a mother-daughter team. We specialized in the weird and dangerous. We made retired police officers uncomfortable with our stories, and we freaking loved it.

But this time—*oh-ho* this time—it was "too dangerous" because Pawpaw's medications "were on the fritz" and he might have "psychopathic tendencies." I argued that if I stayed home every time one of our family members went on a potentially psychopathic bender, I'd never leave the house! Plucking the keys from my hand, Mom said that this time was different. I had never seen Pawpaw like this before, and she didn't want me to ever see him like this. Plus, whenever this happened ("How many times," I interrupted to no avail, "has my sweet, docile grandfather gone homicidally M.I.A.?") Mom was the only person he recognized and actually heard. She ordered me to stay by the phone "in case."

So I wasn't there when Mom drove around the back roads at ten miles per hour, calling out my grandfather's name and supplementing her headlights with an LED keychain light. I wasn't there when she found him, dirty and injured, shoeless and confused, by the creek ten miles from his house. I wasn't there when she drove him home, set him on the couch to assess his damages, and then answered the front door to the police—nobody in the family has yet owned up to calling the police that night, but we all know it was Rachel—jingling handcuffs in her face and demanding the wrists of Harold Cobb.

Though I never actually saw the standoff that followed between my mother and the police, I have heard the story from several sources, including Mom and multiple men of the law.

I like to imagine her standing in the front doorway, barring the police with her slim frame and watching more and more uniforms pile up on the small porch as more and more Cobbs barricaded the door behind her. I enjoy imaging it this way because there have been so many dialogues between the Cobb family and the Millbrook police in this house that I now see them as opponents—respectively, supporters of Jesus and Roman soldiers, if you will. Within the dwelling, there is always one Jesus that his or her supporters are trying to protect, be it a sick Pawpaw from unlawful arresting or dead Uncle Randall from condemnations of drug addiction. Along the porch and filling the yard are the Roman soldiers, who (though they have good intentions...probably) do not understand the circumstances and are so determined to follow orders that they are willing to nail whoever wears the beard to a big old public cross.

So, the Jesus of the evening, adversely affected by pharmaceutical errors and deeply buried post-traumatic stresses, wandered the living room wailing about people burning alive and cannibalistic monsters in the creek—loud expostulations that did not help to ease the minds of the Roman police. Meanwhile, my mother, aka Saint Peter the Rock, continued blocking the doorway, explaining again and again that the Jesus was very sick and needed to get to a hospital room, not a jail cell, as quickly as possible. But the Romans, who already brought the wood, nails, and thorny vines, were itching for a good crucifixion; "Give us the Jesus," they cried. "We want the Jesus."

The situation escalated as Pawpaw saw the police outside and mistook them for the enemy soldiers he once fought overseas. He was not far off. His wails turned militaristic and, to the ears of the law, threatening against their persons; they did not care that he was almost eighty, injured from falling down a hill into a rocky stream, nearly drowned in five inches of water, afflicted with violent hand tremors, and required assistance in cutting up his catfish at dinner. They had smelled blood; they *would* paint their cross with hemoglobin.

"My father is very sick," Mom tried again, speaking calmly and clearly to the scowls and guns shuffling on the porch. "I am going to bring him outside, put him in my car, and take him to the VA."

"If you bring him outside," said the Romans, "we will arrest him."

"If you arrest him, I will sue each of you individually and the police department collectively."

A few of them paused: Could she do that? Uncertainty spread among the ranks as the possibility of being sued increased with every witness occupying the Cobb house and

every nose pressed against neighboring windows, watching and listening to each word spoken, each step taken.

Just as the tension was about to snap violently in one of two serious directions, an angel arrived: Lieutenant Fields, six foot seven, skin with the hue and warmth of molten milk chocolate, and the oldest constabulary friend of the Young family. He walked casually through the knots of tensely posed officers, like a cloud wafting through a minefield, and up to the front door without trying to barge his way inside. In a friendly manner, he asked Mom what was happening.

"My father is very ill," she explained. "The pharmacy accidentally gave him the wrong medicine. I have to take him to the hospital right now."

Lieutenant Fields, rather than questioning his men or demanding further explanation, merely turned to the porch-dwellers that had been nailing my grandfather's cross together and said, "Well? What the hell are you doing? Help her get the man to her car!"

Furiously, resentfully, the policemen backed away, allowing my mother and Lieutenant Fields to half-carry Pawpaw to the front seat; since he was obviously still hallucinating, grotesque, abnormal words poured from his mouth but in a quieter, more subdued tone. Clearly too weak to fight or cause any damage to people or objects, Pawpaw's condition drew a livid round of castigations from Lieutenant Fields upon his officers as Mom drove away.

And so my grandfather began his stay in the Tuskegee veteran's mental health hospital.

On Saturday, four days after the police standoff, Mom and I drove up to visit Pawpaw. Riding from Millbrook to Tuskegee takes a law-abiding driver about an hour, and along the way we joked and carried on more happily than any two people in our situation should have. The day was beautiful and bright; we decided to bring Pawpaw his favorite cheap meal—a fish fillet sandwich from McDonald's—and received laughably rude service (Mom: "We would like one fish sandwich." McD. Employee: "No fish." Mom: "Pardon?" Employee: "*No fish! We ain't got no fish!*"). We wound up bringing him and his nurses (for bribery purposes) candy bars from a gas station, a facility that gave us better directions to the hospital than our moronic GPS, which insisted the back parking lot of Tuskegee University was the V.A. mental hospital.

Mom had been slipping little bits of visitation coaching to me along the ride; stepping into a mental hospital was a completely different experience, she said, than visiting a regular hospital. You had to be especially careful, taking everything anyone said with a grain of salt. Patients were likely to say disturbing, nightmarish things, and my status as a pretty young woman meant that patients would probably add weird sexual remarks in the wild Chex Mix of conversation. I was not to maintain my normal disposition of wide smiling and direct eye contact; this behavior would only enliven the sexualized remarks and stir unnecessary excitement in the prisoners—err, patients.

When I asked my mother how she knew about these things, she explained that Pawpaw had had these mental troubles all her life. She had always been the only person to whom he would listen, and though these episodes only came about when his

medication was botched, she remembered exactly how to deal with them. Days of her youth had passed at the Nervous hospital—

"The what?" I interrupted.

"The Nervous hospital. Old folks call it that because mental illness used to make everybody uncomfortable. Well, more uncomfortable. So instead of saying someone had a mental breakdown or psychotic bender, they said they were 'nervous' and had to go to the 'nervous hospital.'"

"Is it ironic that the jackasses who ignored serious medical conditions used such polite code names?"

"Nah. That's just society."

For fun, we began referring to it as the Nervous hospital, and I had to coach myself not to use the term when we arrived.

Wisely, the patient ward was not on the first floor; anyone seeing a patient had to travel two floors up an elevator that required a key to enter. Once the door opened on floor three, however, a gaggle of aged men in calming blue jumpsuits gusted around like sugar agitated at the bottom of an iced tea glass; a number of them pressed right up against the elevator doors, and only one sturdy male nurse prevented them from rushing inside.

As we picked our way through the sea of mentally damaged veterans to check in at the nurse's station—which was, by the way, encased in an aquarium-style bubble of patient-proof glass and plastic—another nurse fetched Pawpaw from the large common area that had been modeled after a bus station waiting room. A man about Mom's age and my height meandered over to me in a non-threatening way; he looked pleasant

enough, and his eyes had a reassuring focus to them that many of the other patients lacked.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," I said.

"I'm God," he said.

"Oh, my." And there was the crazy, right behind his pupils. It was well hidden. "Um, how's that going for you?"

He shrugged, gestured at an empty chair, said knowingly, "Everything's better with pretzels." I agreed, and he wandered off. Behind me, Mom snickered inappropriately.

(A few months previously, my friend Amelia stopped me after we had a lengthy encounter with a homeless man and she said, "Sometimes, when I watch you dealing with crazy people, I get really concerned because you're so good at it. You flawlessly communicate with the weirdest people—people who belong in special rooms with all the furniture taken out. I see you talking to this wackadoo who sends love letters to Sarah Palin and tries to have sex with buildings with little to no difference in how you communicate with the rest of the world. And they seem to seek you out, too—you give off crazy-seeking pheromones. And all this makes me terrified that I am one of them, and I just can't tell because you're so fucking nice." I thought of her words as God, the patient, moved out of my sight.)

A nurse wheeled Pawpaw to our corner of the hall. He looked mildly confused as the nurse pushed him out; in a tone too low understand, a steady stream of mumbling issued from his barely parted lips. His white hair, normally brushed back and held in

place with a small amount of product, stuck out in odd directions, as if he'd been in a scuffle. When his eyes landed on Mom, he brightened slightly but did not cease mumbling.

"Hi, Dad!" sung Mom in her happiest voice, normally reserved for babies and reunions after extended absences. "How are you?"

I expected him to go through his normal roster of family names before arriving at the correct ones ("Uh, uh, Jean—Pam—Terry—Randall—Laurie!"), but he only reached for Mom's hand and held it tight. The nurse led us to his room, and only when the door closed did he seem to come to himself.

"L-laurie, I don't l-like it here," he said immediately. I walked over to his window and pushed back the curtains to let the cheerful sunlight inside. Everything in the room smelled like cleaner and was made of plastic; the bed reminded me of a weekend I spent at the future-styled Space Camp where I picked up the flu and a stomach virus. Everything was sterile, washable, fake. I didn't like it either.

"I know, Dad," consoled Mom, still holding fast to Pawpaw's tremoring hand. "But you just have to stay here until the doctors straighten out your medication. It won't take but a few more days."

Pawpaw's wrinkled face turned from Mom's to the window, and he whispered in a terrified voice, "But, but Laurie, they're doing human sacrifices out there on the lawn. They're worshipping the devil. I saw 'um, l-last night they put a man on a spit and roasted him al-live. They're gun-na roast me tonight, L-laurie, r-roast me al-live."

A twinge of horror swept through me; what the hell had Pawpaw seen in his life to hallucinate such things?

I pressed my emotions down; we were here to help him, and showing any negative reaction to his delusions might perpetuate them. Following Mom's lead, I shook my head and picked up Pawpaw's other hand.

"Dad, none of that happened. The pharmacy gave you the wrong medication, and you're seeing things that aren't really there. These nurses only want to help you. Nobody is hurting anyone else. Nobody is going to hurt you." Mom locked eyes with Pawpaw as she spoke, and though he clearly understood what she said, he turned his head from her. The set of his jaw said, "Well, you'll see, won't you?"

Beneath her well-composed exterior, a broken-hearted frustration arrested my mother; I could see how badly she wanted her father to understand, to be in command of his thoughts, to believe her words, yet her only weapon against Pawpaw's own mind was calm, reasonable conversation. It was like trying to crack a cinderblock with a Q-tip.

"Look, Dad, we brought you a chocolate bar," Mom said, and the Q-tip turned into a jackhammer. Pawpaw's face brightened, and he looked around hopefully, although in his selfless way he told Mom that she didn't need to bring him things and that she and I should eat the chocolate bar ourselves.

We insisted that we'd eaten a factory's worth of chocolate on our way here, and as we broke off pieces of candy for him, the visit took a pleasant turn. Pawpaw hardly vacillated from reality as we chatted. He asked about "Miss Judy," as he always called my grandmother, and we told him all about Nanny and the grandchildren that were too young to visit. As long as we held his hands and fed him morsels of Hershey's, he held tentatively onto reality and happiness. Occasionally, his eyes turned to the window and a low murmur escaped his lips: half-verbalized topics ranged from fire, cannibalism, more

human sacrifices, evil spirits, possession, and the devil worshipping double lives of the nursing staff—or what we assume was the nursing staff since he would only use pronouns in his warnings. For over an hour, we tried to laugh, tell stories, and ground him as firmly in reality as we could. Before we left, we made sure to stockpile Pawpaw's drawer of personal items with handfuls of candy, securing the drawer's safety by bribing the staff with hits of Kisses and Peanut Butter Cups.

Mom sent me out to do the bribing, and on my way back, my family's voices drifted out Pawpaw's partially opened door.

"Laurie, only you could have stopped those policemen from storming the house. You know what would have happened if you hadn't stopped them."

Pawpaw's tone had not conveyed a question, but Mom felt obligated to answer. "Well, considering the war medals in your room, I believe you would have shot most of them."

He paused, probably to squeeze Mom's hand and look her respectfully in the eye. Regret tinged his matter-of-fact words. "Yes. I wouldn't have wanted to, but that was where my mind was at, and I have the ability."

"I know. But, Dad, you would have done the same for me."

Wondering if I should walk the hallways full of mentally damaged men rather than eavesdrop further on this exchange, Pawpaw, using his passion-for-Jesus voice (a voice inflected with emotion so strong that it constantly threatened to turn into tears), said, "Yes, I would, Laurie. Only for you."

And neither spoke again on the subject. After several long seconds, I made a noisy re-entrance and announced that the employees had been successfully bought off.

Pawpaw chuckled, and we resumed discussing safe, unemotional topics. My mind, however, couldn't help wandering, curious as to whether Mom and I would one day have the relationship that she and her father had now. Would I have to stand between her and a gung-ho police force? Would I have to break off bits of chocolate and feed them to her to keep her in this plane of reality? Would our family history repeat itself?

As I watched my mother and imagined being the only barrier between her and the corpses of a dozen cops, I realized that Pawpaw didn't trust Mom because she was his first daughter or because his crazy father had trusted him. He trusted her because she was special. She was reason in a world of chaos. She was a solution, not a problem. She was good in a way that, had she lived a few hundred years ago, she would have unintentionally gathered followers and started a religion, and their motto would have been, "Just do the right thing and nobody will have to worry, damn it." If anything, Mom would one day have to stop me from killing a group of armed men, not the reverse. She was special, and I was lucky.

She looked at me curiously when I smiled. And then Pawpaw mentioned somebody eating a baby, and we had to remind him for several minutes that there was no baby consumption happening on the premises.

When we said our goodbyes, Pawpaw hugged me tight and said, as he had said to me every time we parted my entire life, "I sure do love you."

A burst of happiness and hope detonated in me at these words; we had helped root him in love and cheerfulness, and his use of that catchphrase convinced me that he would recover from this incident. He would recuperate. He would be himself again.

Emerging from Pawpaw's room sent a wave of badly concealed whispers around the patients, "It's the go-go girl!"

"Look! The go-go girl!"

"Where's the go-go girl going?"

I realized that they were talking about me, and when I heard the word "dance" yelled across the room, I booked it to the elevator. An extremely tall man, who had been slouching after Mom and me wherever we went, followed us to the silver doors and attempted to walk inside. The study male nurse blocked him and said, "Nice try, Frank."

Frank's eyes bugged out a little and he argued, "I'm going to be late!"

Kindly, the nurse replied, "No, Frank, you're not."

"You have my tickets!" Frank shouted, pointing at us. "Give them to me! I need my tickets!"

"Go have a cup of juice," the nurse said, gently steering Frank away from the elevators as the doors began to close.

"*BUT THE OPERA!*" The words swept through the last crack, and then we were moving downward.

I didn't realize how exhausting being around that sea of crazy veterans had made me until the doors shut them out. Mom, too, looked tuckered. We both leaned heavily on the walls, staring into space, thinking dreary thoughts.

"You stole that poor man's opera tickets, didn't you?" I said lightly. The doors opened, and we walked into the sunlight, which felt gloriously like a cleanser.

"Yep," she replied. "They'll never know he's not crazy."

I chuckled.

We climbed into our car, but neither of us put on seat belts. We just sat for a moment, processing what we had seen.

"That was…" Mom began but never finished. She rubbed her nose thoughtfully. I put my hands on the hot dashboard, trying to warm them. They didn't seem capable of retaining heat. Mom put hers up as well, squeezing the hard plastic, and she said, "Let's go gambling."

"Huh. Okay. Let's go."

So she started the car and drove us to the small casino that we passed on our way to the hospital. We wandered around the massive, windowless interior of this moneymaking empire, gazing at people who had given their souls to slot machines and slot machines that returned nickels. We both lost twenty dollars playing games we didn't understand. Finally, we went to the pristine bathroom, scrubbed our hands, arms, and faces, and went home a little poorer and not caring.

Why sacrificing money to the casino gods washed away the mental grime of our day is still mysterious. Maybe we deposited our sorrows in those peopleless bodies attached to quarter machines. Maybe we just needed something unusual to buff over the Nervous Hospital happenings. Or maybe we just needed to lose something that we didn't care about losing in case we later lost something that would hurt.

Back before Southerners had the distracting entertainment of television, some jackass made a rule about death: despite what time of the day or night a relative dies, his or her family must be informed of the departure as fast as communicationally possible.

Because of this rule, my mother's face reserved a special expression for post-midnight awakenings—awakenings which, in our family, either meant death, jail, or an Incident. I learned to prefer the death rousings. Dead people never have to be talked off ledges or need to be restrained in a backseat and driven somewhere at top speed.

Sometimes, when Mom pulled her daily fears into her dreaming world, she would wake me just long enough to make sure I hadn't befallen whatever fate Dream Lacey had been subjected to. In these cases, her face bore a concerned, worn wrinkling that relaxed as soon as I managed to mumble, "What? What now?" to which she would reply softly, "Just a dream."

Anyway, I learned to recognize what I call her *Action!* expression. That's exactly how the word appears in my head when the expression is upon me because it always meant we were going to have to go do some bullshit requiring fast, focused *Action!* Three main emotions composed the basis of the look: anxiety, harassment, and urgency. Generally, she had the tapered eyes of anxiety, the pinched mouth of harassment, and the crinkled forehead of urgency. Sometimes, the flared nostrils of anger accompanied the rest of the face, and the whiteness of her nostrils tended to indicate the degree of anger. Depending on the situation, one emotion dominated its siblings.

For instance, for my grandmother's one A.M. heart attack called for anxious eyes casting their aura upon a pinched mouth and an extremely crinkled forehead.

Since I had gone to bed at half-past midnight, my view of Mom's face was unhampered by the groggying effects of good sleep. Her barely-brushed hair, professional shirt, and pajama bottoms complimented her *Action!* expression nicely; the combination said, "Get the hell out of bed and drive! No time for shoes, just go! go! go!"

More politely, her mouth said, "Mom might have had a heart attack. I can't see at night, so you have to drive me to the hospital. We have to go *now*."

The "*now*" did not mean "in ten seconds when you pick up your sneakers" but rather "I'm handing you the keys as I'm speaking." Naturally, I attempted to climb and roll out of bed simultaneously, dragging and tripping myself like a drunken antelope falling down a hill, and I found gravity tossing me down the stairs before I genuinely processed what Mom had said. The *Action!* expression left no room for questions or even thoughts. We were soldiers in the army of necessity.

Sixty years of smoking cigarettes had the entire family assuming that Nanny would die of lung cancer. It wasn't a fun assumption, but she and we had come to terms with it. One day, she would need breathing treatments or cough up a lung. We should have seen her heart attack coming. Science showed us the link between heart attacks and smoking; *no, no,* we said. *It'll be the cancer for sure.* That's the way we lived, relying on cancer. And goddamned cancer let us down. When I finally heard the confirmation that Nanny's heart had rebelled, I imagined a cell-sized competition board that lists all the nastiest illnesses—diabetes, cancer, heart attacks, malaria, etc.. It has categories like "Greatest Population Damage," "Ease of Infection," "Speed of Death," "Physical Damage," and "Emotional Damage." All the diseases make fun of each other when their rates drop, and the ailment with top marks gets a crown embossed with the title "King of Biology," which is just bigheaded. Cancer was distractedly doing a victory dance when somewhere a frowning cardiologist said, "Uh-oh, Judy Cobb," and heart attack's marks shot waaaaaay up—mostly for the emotional damages. Dejectedly, Cancer handed over the crown and went to sulk in a village by radioactive river.

Someone once told me that I use imaginative humor to deal with difficult situations, and I told him he was wrong in the form of a rap about vegetables. I stick by what the tomato said.

The bypass surgery improved her health for a while. She had to give up smoking while she recovered, and I have never experienced such evidence about the damages of smoking as I did when my grandmother's voice changed. All my life, the woman had a beautifully feminine cadence tempered with a raspy texture. I never assumed her real voice was different until I visited her a few weeks after the surgery and chanced upon her singing.

It was like a mermaid's song, like a rainbow was pouring out of her mouth, like someone removed all the rocks from a stream. She could have wrecked passing ships and caught a leprechaun. No rasp remained, just music, and the complete removal of cigarettes was clearly the cause. Her throat must have previously been a heavily pocked cave, and the tendrils of her voice caught on the ledges and crannies as they sailed toward her mouth. Now the pocks were gone, and the cave walls were smooth as glass.

When I remember her now, I like to remember this moment. She was ageless, nearly bodiless, just a lake of music lapping waves against my ear. Because she took up smoking again not long after this moment, I really never got to hear her pure voice again. And her health steadily declined.

We had many good times before she died, and as the end drew near, the family filled her home with love and food and people. Even after she died, when no one else in the family would go near her as we waited for the proper authorities to arrive, Mom and I sat with her, holding her hands. Being dead didn't change the fact that she was my

grandmother and Mom's mother, and if there are such things as spirits, I like to think that we sent hers off with all the love and hope that a spirit can be given.

Sadness set in when the police and a coroner came to declare her. They seemed a little ruffled that Mom and I were not disturbed by the dead person in the living room but did not ask us to leave. I was just beginning to feel deep pangs of sorrow when I realized that the tall young officer on scene was blatantly assessing my physical attributes. For a moment, I was offended. What kind of person would check out the granddaughter of the dead woman he'd come to collect? It was tacky and gross. Wasn't there some code in the policeman's handbook about keeping your eyes to yourself?

The scientist in me kicked in and tried to console my emotional brain with reason and facts: wasn't physical attraction the first step in producing offspring? The presence of it near death should remind you about the circle of life; do not be sad, Lacey brain, for all things must end and all things begin again.

Why, scientist, said my brain, *you sound a little like J.R.R. Tolkien.*

Thank you, Lacey brain, said the scientist. *You don't sound too bad yourself.*

Success: I distracted myself and, thinking about the circle, felt slightly better about Nanny's death.

One of the most disturbing aspects of dealing with your impending death has to be picking the person who delivers your eulogy. A few weeks before Nanny's death, she asked me to deliver hers, a task I would not at all have minded if not for the fact that she suggested I begin writing it that day. Several things distressed me about this:

1. Since it was a eulogy, I had to write in past tense. An irrational fear of jinxing my grandmother into death haunted me.
2. She would want to read it, and what if it wasn't good enough? Could there be anything in the world worse than a grandchild writing an unsatisfactory eulogy and seeing the truth on the eulogee's face?
3. She mightn't be able to read it because she might die before I finished it. Hello, lifetime of enormous guilt.
4. I cope with death in very inappropriate ways—bad jokes and unrestrainable laughter. A eulogy would embody these characteristics, and nobody would understand that I was not, in fact, a huge bitch cackling about her grandmother's death but a psychologically dysfunctional human being.
5. I would rather have a group of people watch me throw up behind a van than watch me cry in any situation. I don't like people knowing personal information about me, including what I am feeling at any given moment. That's why I lie so often and so well. I doubted that I would be able to remain stone-faced as I delivered a speech about my grandmother over her own coffin.

On the day of the funeral, I became hopeful that Nathan's fountain of vocal misery would distract everyone from my eulogy. I searched for him eagerly, waiting to see his tall head and red eyes shuffling inside. When the pronouncement of death had been made at Nanny's bedside, he had wailed louder than the tornado siren and the police almost had to restrain him. I prayed that his grief had not worn off. I prayed I would not go to hell for the previous prayer. Then I remembered that I did not believe in prayers or

hell, so I crossed my fingers and hoped karma would understand, although I didn't believe in karma, either. It was a confusing day.

Nathan did shuffle inside, and his eyes were red but not from crying. There was no other word for it: Nathan had been mellowed out. One of my cousins had given him a sedative or *something* before letting him leave the house. Though the effect had turned him into a chill sort of zombie, he was clearly not experiencing the emotional turmoil that I need to distract from my own emotional turmoil.

Why didn't *I* think of drugging myself before I left? Damn it!

Nanny's preacher took the podium and said a few godly words before inviting me up. I trudged over, hoping to prod Nathan into a scene by emphasizing a few key words before I actually began the eulogy: "Thank you all for being here on the *very, very sad, sad* day. Yes, *very sad.* My grandmother, *Nanny* to us grandchildren, has *died.* Indeed, she is *dead*, and her *death* is a *sad, sad* thing. Though she is *gone* in body, her spirit will never *leave* us, despite how *very, very sad* we become."

I squinted at Nathan. Tears poured steadily down his cheeks but his face was pleasantly blank—like how a person numbed up at the dentist can't stop drooling and doesn't even realize it's happening. I cursed him silently and began the eulogy proper, pausing to take many deep breaths in lieu of crying. People would be convinced I had asthma before they got proof I could cry!

I ignored the beautiful wooden box resting in front of me as I talked. My mouth went on autopilot. I began to ponder the many possible reasons that Nanny picked me to write and deliver her eulogy. Was it because I enjoyed poetry, like her? Was it because I was strong like my mother, but not directly her daughter and thus more capable of

maintaining myself in this stressful situation? Was it because she thought I wrote beautifully and elegantly and would immortalize her with words no one would ever forget?

A combination of those ideas must have entered her mind, but I don't think she was correct about any of them. If I had written what I really, deeply felt, I wouldn't have been able to read it out loud to a group of strangers. If I hadn't written what I really felt, I would have been able to speak but I wouldn't (and didn't) say what really should have been said. I just couldn't say those things that deserved to be said. I just couldn't write what needed to be written.

These thoughts were partially the scientist thinking, trying to pose a theory to explain a phenomenon. I started to read a favorite poem of Nanny's aloud, and my brain suddenly said to the scientist, "Just shut up about it. You don't have to wonder why she picked you. She picked you, and that's all you need to know."

So the scientist shut up. I had to take a very deep breath, release it while staring at the second sheet of my eulogy (which, by the way, I accidentally gave to Diana and had to extract in the middle of the speech), and continued onward.

I didn't start crying until I was safely alone at home.

Pawpaw, who had been in a deteriorating state of health for years, survived six months after Nanny died. During that time, he lived with Pam, who had somewhat cleaned up the garbage maze around her home. Mom, Daniel, and I sat around with the rest of the extended family, attempting to bring a smudge of cheer into a trailer waiting

on death. Mom had been seated right beside Pawpaw for hours, holding his hand, reading his favorite scriptures, and telling stories. The man was ready to die—had been ever since Miss Judy went first. Being right with Jesus, Pawpaw felt no fear about his fate. Even though I remained uncertain, his conviction comforted me.

Mom had been sitting with him all morning and all afternoon; he had grown quiet in the past couple of hours, and we all knew what that meant. However, Pawpaw was a strong man; it would take him a long time to die. Finally, Pam offered to sit with Mom so she, the cousins, and myself could obtain some food for the house. The errand was a courtesy to Mom, who was cloaked in gloom and in need of sunlight. She needed to escape this room, if only for a short while. Pawpaw would probably be holding on until nightfall anyway.

So Mom, three of my teenage cousins (Ashley, Ray, and Alan) and I piled in my tiny Toyota Yaris, a vehicle that has won various size-mocking nicknames from my friends (the Egg, the Flea, the Micromachine). The boys spoke around mouthfuls of their own knees as we chugged to the Wetumpka Wal-Mart, and Mom felt a little better when I made sharp turns that tumbled the backseat cousins into knots.

We were in line with a tray of frozen taquitos when the call came.

Pawpaw, Pam said, had passed.

Poor Mom froze, and not simply because her father had died; she hurt because he had died and she hadn't been there. With all the other deaths she'd been around, she made a point of staying next to the dying soul, keeping them company and giving them comfort until their last moment. She had intended to do this with Pawpaw, and now she felt that she had failed him.

In a stupor, she walked to the cashier with four dozen Mexican tortilla rolls. I put my hand on her shoulder, and as she tried to pay the cashier with her driver's license, she said exactly what I knew she was going to say: "I should have been there for him. Why did I leave him?"

Guilt—for the rest of her life. I could see it already weaving its way into her personality; it would strike her as she tried to sleep, soaking into her soul, slowly bleaching her happiness.

"Mom," I said, "You have always been there for Pawpaw. Your whole life, you've been there. And you have been at that house, sitting with him, all day. I don't think you missed his death because you had to take a break. It can't be coincidence that he left just as you left; I'd bet my hand that he was waiting for you to go. He didn't want you to have to be there for him one more time. He wanted to be the parent, the one taking care of you, the very last time he could."

Maybe I should not have added that last part because a dagger of grief slashed across her features. She took a breath and whispered, "Could be."

We exchanged sad nods and walked back to the car with the cousins, who had been consoling each other with long hugs and snotty sobs. I badly wanted to say something to comfort my mother, but we had already been whispering those types of things all day: "He's ready to go." "He'll be together again with Nanny." "Pass the gin."

As the cousins drifted ahead of us, I said, "Too bad we can't go gambling right now."

She heaved an agreeing sigh, but then paused and pointed ahead of us. "Bet you a dollar Ray gets to the car first."

A small smile cracked my lips. "Oh, you're on. I saw him twist his ankle this morning chasing a dog; it's Ashley all the way."

We watched carefully as they neared the Yaris. Ray was nearest when Alan stepped in front of him to open the door for Ashley, so Mom and I both lost. And we didn't care.

When we got back, I had the task of sitting on a broken swing set with Pawpaw's preacher, who was afraid of death and would not go inside.

I was irritated with his behavior, even more so when he began giving me his preacher spiel. Jesus this, the glory of God that, saving the souls of all of mankind—all for the low, low price of loyalty to the Holy Spirit. It was as if he was selling this religion.

"Heaven sounds boring to me," I told him after he had gone on about the beauty of eternal life with God for a few minutes. His poor wrinkly face pulled upwards in shock.

"Heaven is the most wonderful place you can imagine!" he said.

"But nothing bad ever happens there?"

"Of course not!"

"So how can you gauge your happiness? If you never experience negative feelings, how can you appreciate positive ones? For instance, after you get over a head cold, breathing through your nose is the most wonderful feeling, but you never appreciate it unless you've been robbed of it for a while."

He looked quite miffed. "We can't comprehend all the glories of Heaven, young lady, until we get there. I can't imagine a greater happiness than spending all my time in God's presence, worshipping him."

I wanted to point out that the only way to get to Heaven was death, the very thing he was avoiding inside, but Mom came up behind me and whispered amusedly to stop antagonizing the clergy. Grumbling, I left him to sit inside with my dead grandfather, mostly because I wanted to pay my respects, but a little bit because I wanted to come back out and shake the preacher's hand after having hugged Pawpaw's cooling body. *It's a really good thing*, I thought as I put my palm affectionately on Pawpaw's arm, *that I wasn't around during the black plague. I would have spread disease accidentally out of revenge.*

Mom didn't tell my lucky bastard of a brother that Pawpaw wanted him to do the eulogy until after Pawpaw had died. Though Daniel may have only had a couple of days to write it, at least he didn't have to live with the fear of writing an unsatisfactory memorial speech. Actually, he probably wouldn't have had to worry anyway because his eulogy was beautiful and thoughtful and perfect, and he didn't have to edit out inappropriate jokes, and he didn't have to stop in the middle of speaking to get the second misplaced page from his friend while titters ran through the funeral crowd.

His words seemed even better when Sissy stepped up after him and, once again, began a tearful intoxicated monologue about how much this family meant to her and how much she missed Rick and Randall. She had, of course, done the same embarrassing

dance at Nanny's funeral, but if she hadn't, we would have all felt something to be missing. Sissy's overly emotional speeches were as vital to the funeral process as eating fried Southern food in a church kitchen was. In fact, she was step six in the five-step grief model: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, and remembrance. No member of the family could run into Sissy at the super market without being forced into a long conversation about all the dead people you had in common, and fate dictated that you run into her at least one a year. She was the step you just kept stepping on.

Everyone felt a little dreary starting the drive from the funeral home to the church, where we would eat the double-fried Southern food that would lead to our own deaths. I was just about to indulge in some dangerous cry-driving while nobody but Mom and Daniel could see me when, in front of God and everybody, Nathan's father Matthew bashed his car into a dumpy blue truck. It was such a perfect hit that we suspected it to be intentional, but Matthew looked crazy with apologies as he stepped out of his car. Apparently, he had been soothing Nathan, who had (as per the last funeral) been giving a calming agent before they left the house. The agent was wearing off, and Nathan's hysterical hiccoughing had sent his father's body twisting toward the backseat, which caused his foot to mash the accelerator, which caused a sandwiching of vehicles in front of the graveyard, which caused uproarious laughter in every car packed with every relative and friend of the Cobb family. It really perked up the funeral.

I'm not sure how people usually visit the graves of their loved ones, but I almost always interrupt myself to go. By this I mean that I am usually in the middle of another

task—running errands or hopping grocery stores—when I realize that if I went to see my grandparents' graves, no one would know. It is extremely important to me that no one knows. I don't know why. People visit graves all the time; I know I'm not weird for visiting my grandparents, but I feel like if no one knows, then perhaps it's not really happening. It doesn't need to happen because none of it is real.

It's not until one arrives at a graveyard that they—and by "they" I mean me—realize how useless graves are to the living. When visiting a grave alone, I stand quietly, staring down the gravestones and bleached faux flowers and little life trinkets with which people decorate graves. My grandmother has an Alabama football belt snapped around the permanent stone vase on her headstone. Some member of my family marked the ground with ceramic angel figurines that are always overturned when I stop by.

Several months after Pawpaw died, I arrived at the graveyard and thought in the silence, "How nice and quiet is it with no one around." And then, of course, I thought about the innumerable amount of dead bodies there were just below my feet, and I freaked out, thinking I heard ghosts whispering in the wind, and I tripped over a gravestone and shrieked.

I did not, however, trip on my grandparent's headstone because it was not there. What is essentially a hunk of rock took over a year to reach the final resting place of Wiley Harold and Jewell Alene Cobb. The process of acquiring their stone was arduous and far too complex. Mom became distressed after about six months because when she went for a graveyard visit without me, she could not find my grandmother. Mom remembered Nanny being buried near an old towering tree, but the cemetery featured five or six pleasant old trees (not the weeping, looming kind of some grimmer graveyards), all

of which look very much alike. She called me, frantic and running as the evening leached light from her path.

I answered the phone to hear incoherent, sorrowful moans that threw out words that were probably "can't," "Mom," and "lost" although to this day I don't know how I understood what she said.

"Look for the tree," I said unhelpfully—a suggestion which won me angry comments about the abundance of trees living in this useless, badly-run coffin farm.

To further confuse matters, a woman sharing my grandmother's first name is buried directly beside the Cobb plot. Since "Jewell" has never been on Entertainment Weekly's Top Ten Baby Names list, this coincidence seemed especially unlikely, leading to my mother's assumption that the idiots at the funeral home had buried her mother next to a man who was not her husband and had given her his last name in cold granite.

The funeral home was closed when this confusing series of events occurred, so Mom had to wait until the next day to call. She was quickly told that her mother was, indeed, buried in the correct plot, but that her headstone had simply not come in yet. The Jewell buried next to James Hines Morgan was a different Jewell, and they were sorry for the trouble.

But they weren't sorry enough to rush order the headstone. Months went by, and though my mother cooled off the stone hunt when my grandfather died (probably assuming that they would now send the headstones together), she soon took to muttering that her parents were buried "in unmarked graves." The funeral home disliked her use of this term as much as a very surprised eavesdropping police officer did, so perhaps their haste to shut her up led to their next mistake.

Since Mom made weekly (and sometimes biweekly) phone calls to the funeral home to check on the progress of the headstone situation, they wasted no time in informing her when the headstone finally arrived. We had been assuming that Nanny and Pawpaw would each receive their own headstone, but no one told us about how every headstone in that area of the graveyard had to look identical because it was the war veteran area. Each plot had one long headstone, the left side of which detailed information on the husband and the right side on the wife. What they did with unmarried war veterans, I'm not sure. Possibly this inconsistency is why Mom was so worried about her mother being snatched into another grave.

"It's here!" Mom sung, tilting to put on both shoes at once with her keys in her hand. "It's finally here!"

I'd never been so excited about a grave marker in my life. We sped to the funeral home and leaped out of the car. Finally, W. Harold and Jewell Cobb could rest in peace.

"Ah, Mrs. Young," said the plump funeral home director. His smile was fixed as if by mortuary glue. "I have your stone right in here." He led us into a backroom full of supplies and stones and pointed at a beautiful slab of inscribed granite:

WILEY HOWARD COBB	JEWELL ALENE COBB
CPL US ARMY	BELOVED WIFE MOTHER AND GRANDMOTHER
WORLD WAR II	AUG 24 1932 OCT4 2009
FEB 10 1928 MAR 29 2010	

"Huh," I said, arms crossed and eyebrows bunched. "Does that say…"

"Yes," my mother replied, her eyes plastered to her father's name. "It does."

The director shifted uneasily, sensing by my mother's posture that a severe error had been made. "Is—is there a problem?"

Slowly, Mom's head turned toward him, and she wore a mask of fury. The last time that expression had turned toward me was six years prior when she had discovered the boy I'd been dating was four years older than me. I watched in gleeful terror, enjoying the slew of colors featured by the director's face, and I watched from a distance of three full arm lengths.

"Howard? *Howard?* HOWARD?! My mother has been lying in an unmarked grave for *over a year* and my father for *over half a year*. After months of me calling and basically having to harass you people to put down a marker, you spell his name wrong!"

"Ma'am, we print the stones directly from the paperwork that we receive from you," said the director, his eye twitching slightly.

"Oh do you really?" I've heard snakes hissing with less menace that this sentence contained. "Let me see it."

"O-okay." He scrambled out the door, and Mom charged behind him. I followed in their wake like a small dolphin traveling behind a battleship.

In his office, the director opened a long file drawer and pulled out a manila folder near the front. I could tell he was about to say, "Look right here, 'Howard,'" when his multicolored face paled. Mom asked softly, "What does it say?" and the man fearfully consented, "It says 'Harold.'"

Needless to say, they sent the stone back. In most business settings, when the company messes something up, they offer their customer something for free to make up for the damages. But since we were at a funeral home, the only thing they could have

done is offer us a discount on our next death. Instead, Mom had them call her everyday confirming the name of the new headstone and the status of its arrival.

Eventually, it came back almost perfect. Mom was pretty sure that they had labeled Pawpaw's military information wrong, but she said to me, "Oh well. Let's call him a WWII veteran, sure. He would have been about twelve, but maybe he looked older."

I feel that it is only appropriate to end this thesis with a tale of cats.

Miss Kitty had several litters of cats over the years, and we sometimes would keep one kitten from a litter before finding good homes for the rest. And yes, they learned about shitting in the attic. It might have been a genetically predetermined characteristic because we still find cat crap in that completely closed-in attic. It's a mystery.

While Miss Kitty has passed onward, I keep two felines in the house, one of whom is her offspring: a black-and-white girl named Fatty. We call her Fatty because she was a huge pillow of a cat for years and years; I don't know what the hell she was eating, but it had to be other cats because she would not scale down. Eventually, she developed a bulimic condition that I fear was caused by our constantly calling her Fatty, so now we call her Phoebe to help her self-esteem. (Her name is still really Fatty. Just don't call her that if you see her.)

The other cat happened upon our porch as a kitten. He is unbelievably sweet and unbelievably muscular. He goes in and out of the house, and I am convinced that all he does outside is hunt. Sometimes he brings his prey, living and dead, inside for us, during

which times a lot of swearing and bleach come into play. I should have realized the depth of his predatory instincts when he wandered into my bedroom years ago and, seeing a glimmer under the pillows, took a swipe at my eye. I still have a claw line on my sclera, and we call this gray cat Damnit, for obvious reasons.

A few months ago, a new neighbor moved into the house beside ours. He is an older man. He now cares for two cats that belong to his girlfriend, who lives in an apartment and cannot have cats.

The girlfriend, probably in her sixties, came over one day. She knocked politely on the door and talked to my brother because I wasn't there. She told him that my cats were, on a nightly basis, beating up her cats. I needed to make them stop because the medical bills would soon stack up.

"Oh, really?" I said to Daniel and not her because I was too mad and sarcastic to talk to an old woman. "She wants my cats to stop beating up her cats? Well, okay, I guess I'll just have to stop sending them over to win blood and glory in the town cat fighting rings. Yes, I'll just *tell them to stop*. I'm sure they'll listen to reason, these cats. What, does she think I'm training them to bring me back the tails of all other cats within a five-mile radius? No, you know what? The problem isn't that my cats are beating up her cats, it's *our* cats are fighting and *hers* are losing. Her cats are little sissies. I don't need to stop my cats; she needs to toughen hers up! Or perhaps if she doesn't want her cats fighting—with my cats, with the menagerie of clawed creatures that live in the woods directly behind our houses, or with each other when one cat screws over the other for a mouse—she should *keep them indoors*."

Daniel had begun laughing in the middle of my tangent and could only squeak out, "So what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do goddamned nothing is what I'm going to do! Is she going to sue me for cat damages? I would *looooove* to attend the trial where she tries to prove that my cats maliciously and purposely single hers out for violent beatings. I'd have to counter that my cats would *never* attack hers because they don't pose enough of a challenge—clearly! Her fat domestic house cats are small potatoes to my imported Peruvian fighting felines, bred for the sharpest teeth, razor-like claws, and a hunger for the flesh of doughier cats. What the hell is that woman thinking?!"

I meant every word of my insane speech. If this woman had a problem with my cats—cats who I'd been caring for and cleaning up after for years—then I would fight her in the style of our pets. Never mind that she was over sixty. I'd let her take the first swing. I didn't care if my cats crapped in the attic every day. I didn't care if it took months to find and clean, or if they did it intentionally. These cats were my cats, and I would deal with and love them accordingly. The attic shits were a part of who they were, and I could no more change that than I could tell them to stop fighting the pansy neighbor cats.

I considered ending this thesis with an anecdote that would give my readers a sense of closure, but I now realize that would be unfair to my original purpose. Since I don't yet have a conclusive anecdote to my life, giving one to you would be a lie. Instead, I will confess that though the binding cover rests only millimeters away from this page, I will continue to write and write these stories. The cat shit will never end, but I don't mind because nobody is ever free of cat shit. Perhaps one day, when my relatives are gone and thus don't mind me revealing some of the more damning stories about them, I will republish this work quadrupled in size. For now, readers, rest in the comfort that humor and perspective provide.Good luck in dealing with your own brands of cat shit.

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