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## What We Hide

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WHAT WE HIDE

by

ASHLEE BOWCOTT  
B.A. DePaul University, 2013

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

*What We Hide* is a collection of memoir essays that explores the themes of mystery and deception in personal relationships, specifically within familial and romantic ones. Though the essays in the collection explore the decades from early in the narrator's childhood through her move to Florida for graduate school, the narrator's keen discernment of the world around her and her curiosity for what experiences shape a person's character remain constant.

Many essays explore the extent of her father's alcoholism and the consequences of it, as well as the narrator's obsession over the possible sources of his addictions. Other essays examine the narrator's relationships with men beginning when she enters high school and question the extent to which her strained relationship with her father both excuses and/or explains the way she deceives and allows herself to be deceived in these relationships. *What We Hide* is endlessly implicating and looks for the accountability of these situations from all sources. The narrator delves into the sneakiness of her parents' courtship, the accusations that become commonplace during their divorce, the ways in which the narrator lies to family, friends, and boyfriends for her own selfish motives, and how each of these experiences shapes subsequent ones.

*What We Hide* uses personal experience, emails, and newspaper articles to demonstrate the vulnerability, contradictions, and complications that are inherent in all of us as humans and how these weaknesses manifest themselves in the relationships with those we are closest with.

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## CLUES

The times I think I could love my father, he's wearing a three-piece suit. A thrift store purchase, the suit hangs proudly in his closet in a beige garment bag. He doesn't wear it often, but it is dry-cleaned regularly—the black fabric pressed stiff and spotless.

The first time he wore it we were at my cousin's wedding in California. I'd just finished third grade, and my father offered me a glass of champagne to toast the new couple. He told me I could have the whole glass since it was a special occasion, but after one sip, I set the flute down, smacking my lips together as I tried to understand what the big deal was about alcohol. Toward the end of the night, "Brown Eyed Girl" played: his song with my mom. Since they separated and I was an identical version of her younger self, it became our song. He asked me to dance. As he spun me around, the stagnant blue of his eyes became shaky, like tiny ripples that water bugs create as they sit atop the stillness of a lake. When the wedding photographer stopped our twirling to take a picture, I stepped on my father's feet to look tall. He pulled me closer than he ever had—me in my short-sleeved pink dress with beaded butterfly design and him in his suit and black bow tie. He would later crop me out of this picture, asking for my help uploading it to several of the dating sites he used, but the quivery blue of his eyes would remain.

The only other times I saw him in this suit, I called him Jeeves. He still wore the black bow tie and combed his shining hair across his head, but he also draped a towel over the sleeve of his suit coat. The plush emeralds and plums of each towel were monogrammed with different initials of the families he purchased them from at estate sales along the wealthy north shore of Chicago. He carried tarnished silver trays, passed down through his family, full of chicken teriyaki, barbecue chicken, mashed potatoes, and local steamed corn. Though he didn't fake an accent, he spoke in an elevated language that I imagined he used when he wanted his students at

the university where he taught to think he was particularly smart. When he wore this suit, he and I were comrades. No longer father and daughter, or the ever more complicated father and daughter-of-an-alcoholic, we were working together to suspend disbelief, to neglect reality and enter into an imaginative world where I was a silent film movie star, he was a butler, and twelve of my closest (also famous) friends were invited over for dinner. It was a reality that we could never hold onto for long, one we had forged together. One that we saved for the nights I hosted these parties.

In junior high, I found a *Clue* murder mystery party game at a yard sale and became obsessed with mysteries. Since divorcing my mother a couple years earlier, my father was eager to do anything for us kids that would give him the upper-hand as favorite parent. For me this meant his constant approval for me to invite as many friends as I wanted and host parties at his house. I spent the time at my father's hogging the single phone line to research party tips on the Internet. I looked up costumes, hairstyles, and names from the 1920s: the decade I thought lent itself best to a night of secrecy and faux-murder.

I hated staying at my dad's house. My younger brother fared better while I kept to myself in the office; the two of them watched sports until my brother fell asleep, leaving my dad to drink without worrying that my brother or I would smell it on his breath. The way my dad acted late in the night, stumbling up the back stairs as he grasped for the railing he never finished building or past my doorway, slurring angry half-words to himself, scared me.

When I was party planning though, I tolerated the visits, if only for the fact that he had inherited a computer from his investment banker brother while my mom would not be able to afford one for years.

I spent all night in his office, tailoring the names and occupations of the dinner party attendees until I had one that fit each of my friends. I made handwritten invitations—a frustrating attempt to copy a gothic font I'd found on the Internet—that I would not so secretly hand out in the junior high hallway of our small Catholic school. Each invitation contained a character bio, letting the girl know what her name and background were, and also how to dress on the night of the party.

It was tough to choose a date that thirteen girls could attend, so I gave them invitations more than a month before the party. In the weeks leading up to the party, I grew anxious. I decided I was bored with the run-of-the-mill murdered-murderer dinner party. So I complicated things. The dining room table had been set for weeks after my dad added the extender to the antique table to make room for all the guests. I placed character name cards at each seat, positioning myself between the two girls who were my favorite at the time. I included another notecard beneath each girl's China plate. The notecard contained a list of the character's friends and enemies, additional tasks the girl had to complete during the party, and secrets she had to guard or use to bargain so she may complete her tasks. I was trying to create three-dimensional characters, ones that helped the girls see the reality I created. I handwrote the notecards, but my friends never accused me of using the knowledge to cheat at the game we played. I did. A few times. The desire to not only be well liked but the most-liked, was too strong not to.

On party days, I got to skip mass with the excuse that I had to set up for the party, though really all I had to do was slip on the floor-length white gown with a crystal neckline that I had found at Salvation Army and wore for Halloween the year I tried to trim my eyebrows with a pair of manicure scissors instead of tweezers. That was the year my father took my brother and me trick-or-treating in Lake Forest—a neighborhood where the mansions were so sprawling, he



had to drive us from house to house where we collected jumbo Beanie Babies and twelve packs of candy bars. Lake Forest was also the reason my father ordered a truckload of rust-colored rocks to scrape across our concrete driveway.

“This is how the rich live,” he told us as we pulled a rake through the towering pile of gravel.

I couldn’t understand why anyone would pay for rocks, even if it did make us look rich.

My mom didn’t get it, either. She often cursed under her breath in the winter when the rocks froze together with the snow, causing the wheels of her minivan to spin and shoot pebbles in their wake as she revved the engine to pull out of the driveway.

Still, from the way my dad talked about Lake Forest, I could tell those were the sorts of people you wanted to impress. So if my white dress was good enough to wear around them, it was good enough to wear to impersonate a 1920s movie star. I paired the gown with a large mink stole that had my grandmother’s initials stitched into the delicate blue silk interior, and I wore a pair of white costume gloves that reached to my elbows.

As the time for the party neared, my dad finished cooking and took a quick shower in the claw foot tub before disappearing upstairs to dress for the party. It was up to me to greet the guests and any of the parents who walked up to the tall blue double doors at the front of the house with them. My brother was always first to arrive—urging my mom to leave mass early by collecting her belongings before Communion and walking straight to the heavy wooden doors of the church instead of back to their pew.

He assumed the role of the owner of the mansion. A man who made his fortune as an old-time gangster and moonshine distributor, he sat at the head of the table in an oversized pinstripe suit and fedora that he cocked to one side. Perhaps my creativity rubbed off on him

because the following year, when he was in fourth grade, he and his classmates had to draw each other's Halloween costumes. One of the boys in class asked my brother what a pimp was so he could draw the costume accurately.

“Oh, it's just a gangster guy who has lots of money and wears nice suits and hats,” my brother said.

My dad and I made him tell the story at least three times on the drive home from school that day, laughing in unison as the car jumped the train tracks past the gas station where we always stopped for snacks.

In the mystery movies I watched, the butler was always a haunting character—ever-present, ominous, with minimal social interactions. My dad acted much the same. I never had to tell him when everyone arrived, though it couldn't have been much of a mystery when thirteen girls were gathered in one room, chatting excitedly and putting on mock accents. A few minutes after we were all seated around the dining room table, he appeared in the doorway, wearing his suit and smelling like Old Spice aftershave and Irish Spring soap.

“Welcome to the Bowcott mansion. My name is Jeeves and I'll be your host this evening,” he said, all formality, as he filled goblets with sparkling grape juice that he bought by the cases on clearance each year after New Year's.

“Master Bowcott has carefully selected you,” he continued, “his esteemed guests, because he values your companionship. This is a night for imbibing beverages, savoring the food the help has prepared, and socializing amongst the elite. Be wary of the sights and sounds around you, and trust no one, for you never know when life will take a turn for the mysterious. I wish you all the best in your endeavors.”

We giggled uncontrollably at the warnings he offered us.

With that he disappeared into the kitchen where he plated the food that had been kept warm in our wood-burning stove. He passed the trays of food to me through the service window that connected the kitchen and dining room before retreating upstairs to the office where he would deliver the news of who was the killer.

I placed the food in the middle of the table and explained the rules for the night: each guest must excuse herself at least once during dinner to learn whether or not she was the murderer. Once each guest learned her fate, the killer had to get up to murder the butler. Only one girl could leave the table at a time. Deception was encouraged so we were frequently leaving with excuses of overactive bladders or the need for fresh air.

The first room at the landing of the back stairs was the office. Each girl went up there and stood nervously, or perhaps sat in one of the movie theater chairs my father saved from the historic theater down the street before it was gutted. The only light in the room was the screensaver on the computer. Slowly my father wheeled around in the office chair to face the girl and let her know whether or not she was the culprit. The killer and the clues about her were up to him—it was the only aspect of the party that was a mystery to me.

I was never the killer so I'm not sure what it was like for the girls who were. Attending a Catholic school where almost all my classmates' parents were married, my friends' parents were wary of letting them stay overnight, both because of my dad's status as a single father and his home's location on the edge of downtown Waukegan—an area of town where the storefronts were either boarded up or pierced with bullet holes. I can't imagine what it must have been like for my friends, searching the hallways of the old house, so they may find my father—this strange man—to “kill” him.

But my friends always played along. I always found the body. Rather than place himself somewhere obvious after he was killed, my father's body was always hidden, as if he wanted me to be the only one who even had a chance of finding him, of alerting everyone to the violent fate he met. It was a position I'd find myself in for years to come.

Once, I found him on the far side of his canopy bed, invisible from the doorway, sprawled face down in the space between the bed and the wall where he sometimes hid half-empty bottles of vodka. Another time, I searched every room on the second floor when I noticed Tango, one of our cats we'd rescued from a barn cat's litter a year earlier, sniffing at the barely cracked door that led to the attic. When I opened the door I found my father lying across the steps, his suit covered in dust.

Each time I found him, I employed my best movie star scream, shrieking loud enough so the girls could hear me at the other end of the house. My dad stayed perfectly still until each girl glimpsed his dead body. Then the game began.

We scoured the house for clues; we sifted through the bookshelves with the original Oz books and ancient Farmer's Almanacs, we opened desk and dresser drawers, looked under beds, pushed our way through racks of clothes in the closet, pillaged the medicine cabinet to search each bottle for hidden slips of paper. For two hours we had free roam of the five-thousand-square-foot house—basement, two main floors, and attic. My father and I hid written clues, artifacts, and personal objects throughout. Though I would never physically find him dead in his home, I would spend the next decade searching for clues that would help me understand him. During the game my father usually ducked away to his bedroom—there were never clues in there—to watch the Major League Baseball channels he paid for.

The process of searching for clues, finding slips of paper on which my father scrawled riddles in all capital letters and burned the edges of with a twig he lit from the fireplace in our living room, was a rush for all of us. We formed alliances, betrayed them, re-formed with another group. There was always at least one halting fight where one group of girls gathered in my brother's room, huffing about the unfairness of the game, and the other group laid across the full antique bed in my room, twirling the lace of the canopy that masked them and teasing the other girls for being so sensitive. I was entranced by the way my father let us explore his home—so willing for this group of girls to dig through his possessions—when so much of my relationship with him depended on secrets.

The word “alcoholic” was never spoken, as if it was a word from a primal language we could never quite grasp, our tongues and lips unable to form those long vowel sounds. I found jugs of wine or bottles of vodka often: on the stairs leading to the basement, between the aisles of lumber in his workshop, next to his bed, in the closet of his room. The bottles, ranging from the tiny glass ones served on airplanes to large, plastic handles with simple block lettering, were tucked away into so many crevices of the house that I began to search for them while he and my brother played catch at the park up the street. I found more in the drawers of his dresser, swaddled in Big Dog t-shirts or Fruit of the Loom underwear, in a black bag he kept at the top of the stairs in the attic, under the sink in the downstairs bathroom. There were also cans of Red Dog beer in the old refrigerator in the basement, calcified with rust. These never worried me. Beer wasn't his drink of choice; he only kept these in the fridge to offer to the women he invited over to watch the Fourth of July parade with us or sort Civil War encyclopedia cards that he ordered over the phone. Still I often crept down the basement stairs, pulled the handle of the

fridge so the door creaked open, and stared at the alcoholic contents inside, hoping they offered me clues to decipher the contents of the rest of the house.

I watched a lot of TV at his house, and I'd seen the *Growing Pains* episode where Leonardo DiCaprio's character angrily pours all the alcohol he finds in the house down the drain, bursting into tears as he talks about his dad's drinking. It was an episode that I watched cautiously, my muscles tightening and my throat going dry if my father came into the room while it was playing. I wished I could fast forward through that scene, which was full of sobbing breaths and silence. I wondered what it would be like to gather up all the bottles I found in my arms and pour them down the copper sink in the kitchen before my brother and dad returned home each day, but I never did it. Taking these from him would acknowledge the problem. Our shared secret was our unwillingness to talk. As children of an alcoholic, my brother and I guessed at what was normal, what we were supposed to hide. It was all a mystery to us.

Instead we kept quiet. My brother and I let my dad talk endlessly about my mother's family, telling us how they were a bunch of drunks plagued by divorce—something his family frowned upon. His favorite story was the one about the first time my mom's parents and his parents met. When their parents found out that they had eloped in the summer before my mother's senior year of college, my father decided to host a dinner at his home to smooth things over.

His mother and stepdad came from old money; they were the sorts of people who ate fried chicken with a fork and knife and served hor d'oeuvres and aged wine from their cellar before each meal. My mom's mom and her new husband showed up an hour late, and he was still drunk from the night before, wearing a powder blue suit and cowboy boots. When my

father's mom offered my mom's stepdad a taste of wine they had brought from North Carolina, she discovered him slumped atop a radiator and snoring.

“That old hillbilly was still so drunk from the night before that he fell asleep in the middle of dinner! Mom was horrified,” my dad told us.

We ignored how many times we had woken up in the middle of the night to the sounds of loud snoring or screaming only to discover our father lying on the landing at the top of the staircase, one arm draped across the velvet settee.

Normally I worried about inviting my friends over, not wanting them to know about the secret we all worked to conceal. His drinking had worsened since my parents separated five years earlier, or perhaps I was just beginning to notice it more as I grew older and more aware of how different our family was.

If my friends had any idea about my father's drinking, they never let on. I was so ashamed of it that I never dared to bring it up, even on the occasions when he came in to talk to us late at night and I was sure they could hear it in the slurring of his voice. I was never sure if he would get drunk, stumble into my bedroom and scare my friends. On the nights of the murder mystery parties, though, I never worried about him drinking. I believed he wouldn't ruin those nights for me because of the world we crafted together. If he did drink those nights, he did it discreetly in his room. In the mornings, he cut us big slabs of coffee cake and was there to tell the parents what a good time everyone had as they arrived to claim their children.

After my parents divorced, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how my dad became an alcoholic. I had always sensed his drinking was odd. The way he set his tall glass of wine on the floor at dinner and took gulps when he thought we weren't looking, rather than keep his glass on the placemat like the rest of us or the glug of the contents of his bottle of wine being dumped

into a plastic cup on nights when he thought his young family was already asleep upstairs. The way my mother could have a couple beers and still be there for us kids when we yelled from our bedrooms in the middle of the night after having a bad dream, but how his drinking kept him sleeping until well into the afternoon. But it wasn't until after the divorce that I began to see and understand that his drinking was a real problem—overheard bits of phone conversations my mother had on Saturday mornings as she cleaned our basement apartment.

If I'd had to guess why my father was an alcoholic, I'd trace it back to his father. My dad's father, William Bowcott, had died while my dad was a teenager. His dad was portrayed as this larger-than-life, fantastical character: a handsome Navy pilot who was also a published author and journalist. A big, strong-framed man, valiant in illness, he hadn't even told his family he had cancer, choosing to fight it on his own until his death. It wasn't until a trip to St. Louis—my father's hometown—when I was in sixth grade that I began to grasp my father's pain. On the last day of the trip we stopped at a cemetery to see his father's grave. I looked at the small marker, laid flat and level with the parched August grass. His death date was the only thing I could look at: December 25, 1962. My father had been well into his forties when my brother and I were born so I had trouble thinking of him as a kid, but I imagined his preteen brother and him waking up on Christmas morning, eager to open their presents, and learning that their father had died. I walked back to the car alone, remembering how he had been so insistent about having custody of my brother and me on Christmas night each year, and my mom never fighting him about it even though they had argued the issues of child support and other things down to the penny.

Another time, we were at the vacation cottage my father had restored in a northwest Illinois farming town. While we were there, we got no cell reception, and though we had a TV,



we had no cable and only kept a few movies in the old mail sorter that we used as a cabinet. One night, after my brother and I spent hours with the neighbors' kids playing capture the flag in the graveyard behind the Presbyterian Church across the street, my father put on *Field of Dreams*. We'd seen the movie a dozen times—we kept it here because the actual field was less than an hour away in Iowa. My brother and I fell asleep quickly, but I was woken by my father's voice toward the end of the movie. I squinted from one eye, seeing the room in a coin slot view. In the movie Kevin Costner's character Ray had recognized his dad as the catcher—Shoeless Joe Jackson—on the ghost team that played at the field after he built it. Ray and Shoeless Joe talked after the game one night and, as dusk was settling, Ray asked his dad to play a game of catch.

“Hey dad, let's play a game of catch,” my dad said over and over, his voice sounding far away, his eyes glossed over with tears and alcohol.

My heart beat so fast that I was sure he would notice I was awake. I swallowed hard to suppress it. I pretended to fall back asleep.

In life, unlike in murder mysteries, there are no unmistakable clues, no set answers. Even my father's most convoluted clues during the parties were nowhere near as confusing as the mystery of his own life. My brother and I tried to unravel the mystery differently—he by getting as close to my father as he could, playing baseball, basketball, football, track because each meant more time my father would spend with him at practices and games, and me by observing.

I was a detective eager for the times my brother and him would leave the house so I could continue my search. It wasn't just the alcohol, either. There was the big metal trough of magazines that he kept outside the downstairs bathroom; on top, there were the *National Geographic* issues his neighbor bought us subscriptions to each year for Christmas, but underneath, there were dozens of *Playboy* issues addressed to my father. I flipped through them,

wondering what he'd do if a new issue arrived while my brother and I were at the house. I also didn't believe that he paid the expensive subscription rates when he was always so frugal with everything else. In the attic there was an old refrigerator box full of *Playboy* magazines.

One day while they were out of the house for a while, I went up there and dug through the box until I found the January '91 issue—the existence of it in his collection somehow betrayed me and my own life, like I had been brought into the world under false pretenses. The hoarding of these magazines was the first glimpse I had into this sort of overt sexuality. I thought of my mother, hugely pregnant with me—one of the pictures in my baby book had her posed on the light blue porch, clutching her enormous belly hardly concealed by a loose-fitting, floor length blue dress—and felt terrible for her. It made me angry to think that my father would sneak up to the attic or downstairs to his workshop to peruse these magazines filled with pictures of unattainable women.

His addiction extended to the filing system he kept in the office. He was open about his online dating, but this card catalog was written in a language that I, as a junior high student, was just beginning to understand. At first, I thought it had to be some sort of code and I flipped through the note cards each time I was alone. Written in red ink, the cards sometimes contained the woman's actual name. Other times, it was just a screen name or other alias. Scrawled beneath that were quick physical descriptions: brown hair, chubby, pretty eyes. Then on the bottom half of the note card, there were number-letter combinations such as "32DD," "34C," or confusing phrases like "great pussy," "huge tits," "no oral" and "shaved bush-nice!!" He often left the container he kept these cards in open. Sometimes he even left the notecards out on the desk. He'd come into the office to talk to me while I did homework and I felt the red ink burning in the space between us. In many ways these cards confused me more than the alcohol. Did he

want me to find them? Did he think I couldn't understand what they said? I wasn't sure what to do with the evidence I gathered about his life.

During my freshman year of college, my father really began to defy death; his survival became the true mystery.

He served a month in jail for DUI and driving on revoked license charges, the better part of which he spent in the medical wing detoxing from alcohol. From there, he was sent to the psych ward at the local hospital. He had a hard time discerning reality, simultaneously believing he spent the last month vacationing at his cottage in Schapville and fighting for his life on the maximum-security floor of the jail where the convicts wanted to kill him for being educated, but where he eventually won their affections with his criminal justice lectures. His brother flew into town to help my mom and me decide what to do with him. When we went to get him from the hospital, the same one where I was born, my father gathered his things into a plastic shopping bag and we helped him walk to the parking lot. While in jail he lost weight and he now wore a white polo and green fleece sweatshirt tucked loosely into a pair of blue jogging pants. The pharmacy glasses he bought regularly on clearance hung crooked off the end of his nose where capillaries had burst into a spidery red web. The whites of his eyes had muddied to a yellow, mucus-like yolk, clouding the once sharp blue around the pupils.

Aside from the times he played dead at my parties, this was the most vulnerable I had ever seen him. During my childhood, I knew there were injuries that happened in the middle of the night: gashes in his cheeks from trying to shave with a disposable razor while drunk, bruises on his head from slipping out of the hot tub set in a nook of our upstairs bathroom and hitting his head on the porcelain bathtub. Regardless of the injury, he always had an excuse for it in the morning and he never let it get in the way of running fielding drills or rock climbing with us the

next day. Now he could barely walk to our car, his legs atrophied from being confined to a hospital bed.

When he left for rehab a few days later, we started to clean the house that he had neglected over the years. Once his sole source of pride, the restoration of the house had fallen apart as my father's drinking worsened. Holes in the stained glass above the front door let in a harsh draft and the whole house smelled of cat urine and mothballs. One day we met my uncle there to rid the house of alcohol, which my uncle believed would eliminate the temptation to drink, not yet understanding the depth of my father's addiction.

My mother and I arrived about a half hour after my uncle, who was sitting at the desk in the library of the house, attempting to get my father's finances in order.

"I've already done a search of the house. It doesn't look like there's anything here. He must have suspected we would look for it, so he either got rid of it or drank everything before he left," my uncle said.

Years before I searched the antique house for clues to my father's illness, my mother played the same game. We knew the secret spots and led my uncle to the basement where rows of alcohol lined the far edge of his workshop.

"Oh, I guess I forgot to look here."

An hour later we had two garbage bags of bottles and another few boxes of porn magazines and videos. My uncle asked if we wanted any of the alcohol, but the knowledge of their source was too painful. I considered taking a few bottles to sell to the college students who lived in my dorm and didn't have fake IDs to buy their own alcohol, but the stuff he had been drinking at that point was something even the college kid most determined to get drunk wouldn't touch.

Weeks after my father returned to his home after completing his first inpatient rehab program, my mother called to tell me that he had fallen down both flights of stairs at the front of the house. I was surprised because he had fallen plenty of times, usually on the back steps, but this time he had broken his C-1 vertebrae, other minor vertebrae along his spine, and his hand.

The front steps were beautiful with their royal blue carpet, ornate brass rods that kept the carpet in place, and smooth, curved railing. They were the same steps that, as a child, I had dreams about running down so quickly that toward the bottom, I lifted into flight; they were in my dreams so often that it wasn't until years later I even realized I couldn't really fly down them. They were the stairs that some rambunctious teammates on my brother's soccer team climbed the railing of, sliding down the shiny banister that my father had sculpted by hand, to the first floor.

After falling, he managed to crawl back up the stairs and into his bed where he slept for twelve more hours before getting a ride from his neighbor to the hospital. The C-1 break almost certainly meant he would be paralyzed, but it was impossible to tell since he had to be placed into a drug-induced coma to detox from the alcohol.

I imagined him staggering up the stairs the night of his fall, truly alone in the cavern of the house. When I saw the fall, I saw it in slow motion, like something from a movie. My father was back in the suit that he used to put on for my benefit. His hair was groomed like it hadn't been in years, and it was still damp from the shower. He stood on the landing at the top of the stairs, surveying the majesty of the house. Even though it was June when he fell, I pictured the banister with the thick pine garland that he fastened to it every Christmas.

And then something happened off-screen. An invisible hand, the blow of a blunt object, the force of a close-range gunshot, that sent him tumbling down the stairs, one after the other, banging his bony shins against each. By the time he reached the foot of the stairs, he had rolled

to his back, hitting his spinal column sharply against the step, or perhaps the railing. Maybe it took the pain away. Maybe the alcohol had already done that. When I saw him, I saw him draped across the stairs, like the time I had searched and found his body in the attic with the help of the cat. There wasn't any blood. But this time, his body wasn't hidden—the desperation of his situation was there, in plain view, at the foot of the stairs.

## **BY BASEBALL SEASON**

When I was a kid, baseball season was the promise of weather that would melt the snow and thaw the hardened ground where my family and I lived in the suburbs of Chicago. Baseball season was a season of hope, renewal, rejuvenation, and all the possibility that summer in the Midwest brought with it. Baseball season meant staying up late because I didn't have to be up for school in the morning and because during the summer of 1998, Mark McGwire was about to break the single season homerun record and I just had to watch.

Baseball season was long, temperate days and then longer humid ones at Upton Park where I watched my father coach my Brother Conner's Little League team. It was a season of bringing our greyhound, 'On A Quest,' with us to the park and knotting his leash through the post of the bleachers so he could sniff out the area while I read Civil War books on the sidelines. Baseball season meant gathering the stray batting helmets and gloves and missed ground balls as the sun set and loading them into the trunk of my father's Isuzu Trooper and then letting Quest off his leash in the empty tennis courts. It meant watching our retired racing dog run laps around us, the power of his muscles seizing beneath the beige fur and bony outline of his ribs, his ears pinned back, tongue wagging from the side of his mouth, as the last glimpse of sunlight dipped into the ravine beyond the baseball fields. Quest was never freer than those days when he ran so fast that the tall chain-link fence around him was just a blur. And we never felt more free than we did when we watched him and knew that all we had to do the rest of the night was condition our baseball gloves, eat food our father cooked on the grill, and watch the baseball games on TV.

Baseball season meant we were always watching or listening to ESPN: in the car on rides to Milwaukee where we watched the Brewers play at Miller Park, at home while we practiced in the front yard, or at the greyhound track over the border in Wisconsin where we watched the

races but never bet on the dogs because it made me sad to think about Quest as one of the them, herded back and forth between a kennel and the dusty, sunbaked track.

During baseball season we left the games on all day in my father's home. At night, we opened the windows and cranked up the box fans. We poked rulers or pencils in the broken slats of the fans until they caught on the dusty blades or we put our mouths close to the cage of the fan and made noises just to hear it distort our voices until they were things we couldn't recognize. We turned the lights off and watched our St. Louis Cardinals play on TV—the brightness of the stadium lights were amplified by the darkness in our own home.

Conner and I were both Cardinals fans—just like our father—but they weren't a popular team to root for so close to Chicago. My father had a way of talking that made everything he liked seem superior to everyone and everything around him. Maybe that's why we adopted his preferences so easily—the confidence of his narcissism was so much more convincing than anything our mother displayed.

She was a Cubs fan and when they were still married, they argued in the kitchen after dinner while Conner and I watched the games on the bulky Zenith TV. We turned the volume up using the hidden panel of buttons beneath the screen and pressed our ears to the stretchy, nylon-like speakers at the sides of the TV to drown out the sounds of their fighting. When they made it to the living room for the last couple of innings, my mother sat with her arms crossed and her back straight against the antique loveseat and swore we'd been dropped on our heads as babies each time we cheered for the Cardinals.

My father's drinking had caused problems in my parents' marriage since my mother eloped with my dad in the summer before her senior year of college, but for me it's no



coincidence that the year she finally left him was 1998: the year of the great home run race between Mark McGwire of the Cardinals and Sammy Sosa of the Cubs.

That summer we watched one or both teams every night after dinner. That season was a season of hope and tension for any baseball fan, but especially for Cubs and Cardinals fans who watched as McGwire and Sosa inched one homerun closer to the record just to have the other player catch up by the end of the night. Some nights, long after I was supposed to be in bed, I snuck down the back stairs, through the kitchen, dining room, and library where I crouched under the desk to listen to the endless homerun commentary on the TV. On those nights, like every night, my dad sat in his emerald armchair and drank from a jug of wine. He yelled at the TV. His speech grew harder to understand as the minutes stretched on. Sometimes I thought he could hear me slinking around in the room behind him, but he just yelled the name of our cat, Hannah, confusing my presence with hers.

It was the night my father tripped over the cord of an oscillating fan and sliced open his ear on one of the blades that caused my mother to finally move us kids out of the house. But I wonder if the direct competition of their favorite teams that baseball season reminded my mother that she and my father would never be on the same team, that they would never learn to understand the other the way she may have hoped or thought she did when she was barely twenty-one and promised to love a man almost twice her age.

Baseball season was a season for making promises: the promise that Conner and I could stay up late to watch the games, even if they went to extra innings, the promise that—weather permitting—there would be at least nine innings of baseball to watch that day, the promise that the players would do their best to deliver for their teams, and the promise that as long as you practiced and dedicated yourself to what you loved, it would turn out well. Even as my parents

fought each other over every aspect of the divorce, mirroring the way that McGwire reached the record first in a game against the Cubs but Sosa quickly came from behind to tie him and they chipped away at one another a homerun at a time until the end of that season, baseball was the promise that nine players would take the field for your team and do everything they could to make them a group worth cheering for.

In the summer before I began junior high, my father, Conner, and I traveled to North Carolina for my grandparents' eightieth birthday celebration. We stayed at a bed and breakfast in the mountains of Asheville, North Carolina, so far away from cellphone towers that we had no reception for our mother to reach us, away from the streetlights that obscured views of the starlit sky, away from the obligations of school and the endless string of court dates and meetings with mediators and divorce counselors.

We were up in the mountains where a gray fog descended over the peaks each night and cleared by the time the sun reached the spot in the sky where it rested until the end of the day. The mountain air was laden with the scent of wildflowers and pinesap and each morning, the couple who owned the bed and breakfast prepared slabs of maple bacon and fresh halves of grapefruits for us. But we still had baseball, which played on the TV in the one-room cabin the three of us shared.

Most of that week we didn't have time to watch, but we left the TV in our room on ESPN, anyways. That week, we spent time in town sampling North Carolina barbecue and shopping for antiques my father would never buy. We celebrated my grandparents' birthdays with a dinner of more than fifty attendees in the main house at the bed and breakfast.

On the night of the party I wore a bright pink and orange sleeveless dress with ruffles at the bottom that made me keep thinking of excuses to change direction quickly so I could watch

the way the dress waved out around my shins and revealed the nude pantyhose my mother insisted I bring despite her not being there to make sure I actually wore them.

After dinner I practiced a trick my aunt had taught me earlier in the week. I folded my napkin over and over until the fabric looked like an oversized bowtie lying on the table in front of me. I picked it up, snapped it through the air, and the two triangles filled, creating a sort of hat. I placed it over Conner's head, the ears sticking straight up, and tied the ends of the napkin around his chin. Before I could grab one of the Polaroid cameras we'd placed at each table to document the party, he untied it and threw it back down on the table.

My brother was prone to tantrums and fits of aggression—when he was losing at miniature golf and video games, when he missed a couple of balls my dad lobbed to him over the plate while was teaching him to switch-hit—and he'd grown angrier in the four years since our parents separated.

When Conner was a baby, he had chronic ear infections, which resulted in him having ear tubes implanted several times. As a result, his hearing suffered, but his speech developed slowly, too, because he wasn't able to hear the way those around him spoke. In a way, he was fortunate because he wasn't subjected to listening to the nightly fights and crashes of antique plates and wine glasses in the same way I was. But his physical differences frustrated him, and our parents' separation gave him more reason for that anger. When our father took us swimming on days he had visitation with us, I was responsible for fitting the custom-made ear plugs into each of my brother's ears to protect the tubes from the water. He grew annoyed with me as we stood in the shallow end and I struggled to fit each plug to the contours of his ear—usually he pushed me away and resorted to swimming without getting his head wet—because I was only eight and watching over this child like he was my own.

My mother tried to get my brother to talk. First we saw a divorce counselor. Then he got another therapist just for his anger. Still my brother sat mute, only lashing out physically toward us after his appointments. Years after his ear problems are alleviated and he is the man I never envisioned that angry boy becoming, he will be unwilling and unable to talk about our parents' divorce and that time in our lives: his speech still frozen in time.

I worried my brother would strike me for embarrassing him by placing the napkin-hat over his head. I worried that his anger might reveal that our little family of three—the lonely father, valiant in the wake of his impending divorce, and his two young children—wasn't as perfect as our dad pretended it to be. Instead my brother took his own napkin from his lap and asked me to show him the steps my aunt had taught us to make the hat. Soon we had mastered it.

As dessert wines and coffees were poured by Carla, the owner of the bed and breakfast, we made our way from table to table and gave tutorials on the bunny ear napkins to each guest. Though my aunt was always the one with the fun trivia or party tricks, she let us take the lead and only joined in to follow with a camera. She snapped a picture of each table of guests donning their new hats. Conner and I stood arm in arm, smiling from behind the chairs of our eager students. Maybe it was the freshness of the mountain air, not so stiff and muggy like in our suburban Illinois home, or the fact that we were hundreds of miles from the custody hearings and counseling appointments that allowed us to be so carefree. When the pictures developed, we looked like the sort of kids who didn't yet know what it meant to feel sadness. We ended that night back in the cabin, flipping through the Polaroids, baseball on the TV settling us to sleep.

The night after the party was our last night in North Carolina, and one of the first chances we had to relax all week. After dinner I stayed behind in the cabin while Conner and my dad visited with my aunt and uncle in their cottage. I was lying on the patchwork quilt of the pull-out

couch my brother and I were taking turns sleeping on, listening to the chirping of crickets outside the screened windows of the cabin. I was thinking of the vacations we used to take as a family back when I was an only child. In those days I'd want to swim in the hotel pools after dark, but was convinced the crickets I could hear around me were in the pool and I'd be too scared to jump in. I was thinking how back then, my dad was the bravest person I knew, and he'd jump in that cricket-chirping water and hold up his arms to lower me in slowly until I was sure the bugs weren't hiding in the pool, just like he promised me one year that if I let him pluck a splinter from my finger, he'd dress like one for Halloween. And he did. Weeks later, he'd dressed in a brown sweatshirt and stuffed ragged pieces of spare wood from his workshop down the back of the shirt and walked around with like that the whole time we were trick-or-treating.

Here in the mountains, the news of baseball was the only thing that could reach us, but on our last night of vacation I wasn't paying attention to the TV. The crack of a baseball against a wooden bat, the lulling chatter of people packing the stadiums, the comforting, conversational tones of the broadcasters had become the background noise of my life. Darryl Kile's name broke through the routine noises of the game as crisp as the sound of a baseball hit so hard off the bat it was sure to be a homerun. Kile was dead.

Then I was gone.

I hopped off the bed, pulled open the door, pushed past the flimsy screen that snapped shut behind me like a firecracker erupting in the still of the mountains. One of the resort's calicos was sprawled across the cobblestone walkway leading to our cabin. The cats were my favorite part of the resort aside from the breakfast Carla served in the main house each morning. Any other time I'd stop and sit next to the cat on the uneven pathway. I'd stroke her neck or

pluck the burs that gathered in her thick tortoiseshell fur, but in that moment I had to tell someone the news I'd heard.

There's no way my family already knew. My dad's family was all from St. Louis—all huge Cardinals fans—and I just had to get to them and tell them what happened.

I ran along the rocky path, my feet slipping against the stones—I wasn't even wearing shoes. My best friend Megan always told me that my feet would be stronger if I walked across the rocks of the driveway that separated my house from hers. I'd spent every summer since then barefoot, carefully choosing my path across rocks, dirt, shrubbery, to avoid the sharp sting of teetering on a misshapen rock. It was all about choosing the right path.

In the dark, dew settled on the petals and leaves for the night and pressed a dampness into the air that made it hard to imagine the mountains without that chill.

I reached my aunt and uncle's cottage and yanked open their screen door off the kitchen. The kitchen was narrow—just enough space for a fridge, sink, and slab of wooden countertop—and definitely not big enough for the breakfast table set in a nook, which rendered the whole kitchen inaccessible if one chair was pulled out. Still, their cottage made me jealous. It was just my aunt and uncle staying there, but they had the biggest room anyone in the family had that week. I resented my dad for being cheap, or being a professor and not an investment banker like his brother, or both.

I shuffled sideways through the kitchen until I was in the living space with its dim lighting that cast shadows onto the peach-colored walls. My aunt, a grade school teacher back home in California, was trying to teach my brother to count to ten in French as they played a card game at the round glass-top table. My dad flipped through a newspaper. With each page he

turned, he rustled the whole thing, creasing the pages toward him rather than settling them like the spine of a book.

I was standing in the middle of the room and trying to catch my breath, but my throat was tight in the same way it always was when I got upset, which was often. My eyes were red-rimmed with the tears I'd held in since I saw Kile's face on TV. Each inhale was staggered. It took a few moments for everyone to notice me, and then a few more to register the worry on my face. I had always been a pale child, but the news must have drained any trace of color from my face and turned it a chalky white—the dark crescents under my eyes more visible than normal. My feet must've been covered in dirt and pinesap the color of amber.

My dad stayed in the wicker chair he had pulled beside the table. He looked over the newspaper and past the rim of his glasses to me in the middle of the room.

“What's wrong, Masher?” he asked and it sounded like he was worried, though he still held the paper out in front of him.

“Darryl Kile died,” I said.

Though I'd never lived in St. Louis, I loved it as if I had. My dad, uncle, and aunt did grow up there, and each morning they read the sports pages of the newspaper to keep up with the news of Tony LaRussa and his team. They knew what it was like to live in a city that thrived on baseball, to watch a game in the sticky heat of a Midwest summer as the sun set beyond the shining steel of the Gateway Arch, to be walking through downtown and be interrupted by the explosion of fireworks over the stadium signifying another Cardinals win.

I'd always had a hard time talking when I got upset and even those three short words were enough for me to break down—all the work I did to keep myself from crying on the run over was done away in a matter of seconds. Now that I was crying, I couldn't stop.

“Turn on the TV! I’m serious it happened,” I said and pointed to the cabinet that housed the TV in their room.

“Mash, don’t you think you’re being a little ridiculous? It’s not like you knew the guy,” my dad finally said and put down the paper.

He started laughing and my aunt and uncle joined in. They weren’t hearty laughs, not the sort the men the night before exploded in when their wives took the pointed napkins we’d taught them to make and placed them over their breasts like the images of Madonna I’d seen on the VH1 specials I watched late at night. They were chuckling just enough to let me know that I was being irrational, which caused me to cry even more.

Conner and I were sensitive children and my father’s relatives had watched us get upset many times over the years. I often cried when I didn’t get my way, or if I saw something that upset me like the bodies of deer tossed into the bed of a pickup truck we followed into town earlier that week, or when I ordered something at a restaurant that they had run out of. Though my father was used to our outbursts, they still embarrassed him and he’d often walk away and pretend like he didn’t know us until my brother or I calmed down. His brother and wife had married young and had much older kids who were now beginning families of their own. Perhaps they had no patience for our tantrums because they hardly remembered what it was like to have children as young as my brother and me. Perhaps my father sensed their annoyance and reacted the way he did to show them he was just as embarrassed by our overly sensitive natures as they were.

Now I hear my father’s laughter as the sound of his world shattering around him. In my memory his laughter is not the malicious, judgmental laughter my eleven-year-old self believed it to be, but instead it is the nerves of a man who had worked so hard to paint this perfect image



of baseball and family and structure in the wake of divorce feeling the loss gnawing at the borders of the life he'd framed for us.

When my parents were still married my father loved to hide from the world and his impending hangovers and the next day's need to drink by staying in bed as long as he could each morning. After my parents separated, though, he worked to create this sphere of the world with our dog, Quest, and the Cardinals that kept us together as a family, and that kept us looking forward to something with each visit we made to his house. My father's laughter was his denial of the possibility that this world he'd created was subject to grief just like everything and everyone else.

And maybe that's why I was so upset: because I was exposed to this façade, the flaws in my father's stories, though I wouldn't understand that for years to come.

When Kile died, I wasn't sure why I was so grief-stricken. Kile wasn't anywhere near my favorite player. Albert Pujols, a young power hitter out of the Dominican Republic with serious eyebrows and a strong jawline, was my favorite.

Still, Kile was a figurehead for the team. For Conner and me, depending on a guy to take the mound every four or five games and doing everything he could to win meant depending on a structure we didn't have anywhere else in our lives during our parents' divorce. At our mom's basement apartment I slept in a walk-in closet connected to the bedroom I let my brother have. When it rained, we listened to the water against the window wells in the basement, never knowing if we would wake up to a flooded apartment where millipedes scurried across the dry patches of tile. At our dad's we spent nights listening to him watching sports highlights and making trip after trip to his basement woodshop to refill his plastic cup of vodka.

When the Cardinals played, we counted on the pitching rotation. We watched each starting pitcher throw his arsenal of pitches as the announcers discussed that night's matchup. For at least a hundred nights a year we had three or four hours of structure where we sat in front of the TV and just watched.

"Conner, it's Darryl Kile," I said and looked to my brother who was wearing a red Cardinals hat.

Conner shrugged his shoulders and never looked up from the cards in his hands. In the years after my parents' divorce when my father's drinking continually worsens, I will watch my brother shut down his emotions in similar ways. We learned how to pretend and maintain appearances throughout much of our childhood and it is exactly what my brother will do for years to come. Denial is a trait best taught by an alcoholic father.

I ran back the way I came, making a point to slam the door on my way out. I heard the card game resume before I was left alone with the sound of crickets in the surrounding mountains.

Back at our cabin I turned the volume on the TV up and waited for another announcement to interrupt the game in progress like it did minutes earlier when I first heard the news. I watched for a picture of Kile on the screen—my crying too loud to hear anything the announcers had to say. At the end of the next inning they cut to the studio and alerted viewers of Kile's death. Then they were at Wrigley Field earlier that day. Joe Girardi, the catcher for the Chicago Cubs, cried as he told the crowd of Kile's death. The ivy along the back brick wall of the stadium was still in the summer air. The men who lined the field faced him. Though blue and red team hats hid their eyes, the tarry lines of eye black smeared over their stoic faces and I wasn't sure if it was from sweat or tears or both.

This wasn't exactly my first encounter with death, though it felt like the first one that mattered and it was the first one I'd cried over as hard as I cried in the mountains of Asheville. My great-grandma had died years before, but the only memories I had of her were the Thursdays we would pick her up for dinner at Old Country Buffet and she'd make racist comments the whole car drive there.

That night at the B&B I cried until I fell asleep, and then some more when I was woken up by Conner and my father returning from the other cottage. I heard Girardi's voice echo out across sunny Wrigley Field at least three more times as the station continued to cut to the announcement of Kile's death.

The next morning was our last day in North Carolina. I was determined not to talk to anyone at breakfast so I brought a book with me to read as I spooned plump triangles of grapefruit into my mouth. My aunt, uncle, and dad flipped through their own copies of the morning paper. I glanced up to see Kile's name on one of the sports pages. I was glad to see it there because even if they hadn't believed me the night before, there was no denying I was telling the truth.

"Geesh, that's really too bad," my father said.

He flipped to another section of the paper and I thought that was all he had to say about it, but then he set the paper down again.

"You know, they were in Chicago when it happened. I'm sure the Cubs have access to those hotel rooms. You never know how far a rivalry can go. We might have a little foul play on our hands," he said and stood up to track down Carla for another half a grapefruit before she closed the kitchen.

He could've been trying to make a joke out of the situation, but his comment made me angry for not thinking of it first. Growing up in a home where my parents hated each other, the Cubs-Cardinals rivalry was built up perhaps even more than the media hype. Each series almost certainly led to an argument.

Earlier that season my mom and her boyfriend had taken my brother and me to Chicago for an architecture tour and a stop at the Billy Goat Tavern. By the time we made our way to the north side of the city for the Cubs-Cardinals game that night, my brother and I were irritable. Still, we put on the Cardinals shirts we'd packed in our mom's backpack and slipped our hands into our baseball mitts. With each run scored in the Cubs' favor, we came closer to tears, and the college-aged kids behind us, red-faced from drunkenness and heat, grew rowdier and began taunting us for cheering for the losing team. When the game ended we made our way down the caged ramps of the field. I yelled at our mom for the fact that the Cubs fans were nothing but a bunch of drunks and stormed off while she stopped near a garbage can to finish the last few sips of Miller Lite in her cup. My brother cried and threw down his glove and stomped on it until my mom's boyfriend picked it up for him.

I didn't know how it hadn't occurred to me before: the sudden death of the Cardinals' best pitcher just happened to be in the city of the team's biggest rivals. And with his cause of death still under examination, I was sure that the Cubs had something to do with it.

If my mom was with us in North Carolina she would've said I was brainwashed. Though I dreaded nights we had to spend at our dad's, I latched onto everything he was interested in. I spent days reading about Lincoln's presidency, the Civil War, the Titanic, and nights cheering for the St. Louis Cardinals, Rams, and Blues. It was an attempt to earn his approval because my father had never been interested in the idea of kids. He didn't have the patience for the

temperamental, needy nature of children. My brother had his sports, which my father enthusiastically supported because they allowed him to re-live the years he spent in high school, finishing track practice a few minutes early so he could sprint across the track, through the football field, and to the baseball fields where he was the team's shortstop.

While most kids my age griped about having to fake interest in their parents' hobbies, especially when they were as boring as things like Civil War history, I studied these subjects to the point of legitimate interest. Perhaps I tried to connect with my father by learning as much as I could about the things that interested him in hopes that he would be impressed. But more than that, the aura of narcissism that came with addiction was undeniable; I liked what he liked because he had a way of making those who didn't share his views look inferior. Though he probably didn't take his speculation of foul play against the Cardinals seriously, his words had convinced me of many things before, and I couldn't shake the idea.

Two days after Kile died, we were back in Illinois and watching the Cardinals play the Brewers on TV. There was a tribute to Kile, and all the Cardinals wore a patch with his number on their uniform. I didn't remember it at the time, but Jack Buck, the longtime announcer for the Cardinals, had died just four days before Kile. It's possible that didn't stand out in my memory of that week because Buck was almost eighty at the time and so his death wasn't as shocking as that of the thirty-three-year-old Kile.

It must have been a dark week for the Cardinals community, for those who had been fans long before the 1998 home run race revived baseball, for those who carried a radio with them to bed to listen to Buck's broadcast of the game. For my eleven-year-old self, Kile's death cast a shadow on that season that I couldn't shake. Kile's young son threw out the first pitch of the

game the following night and the idea that despair could work its way into all facets of life, even those my father pretended were perfect, stuck with me.

The Cardinals didn't make it to the World Series that year.

The week after the season of Kile's death ended, the school my brother and I attended hosted their annual auction. Parents were required to volunteer their time or donate money to the cause. When my parents were together they worked the food service station together. My mom spooned piles of mashed potatoes, green beans, and casserole onto the plates of attendees while my father worked the meat station a few feet down, carving slabs of roast beef and ham.

Conner and I loved staying with our babysitter and her kids on a non-school night, but even more than that, we loved the time when our parents picked us up after the event—later than we ever stayed up on our own—and gossiped with us about the families that had children in our grades. They told us stories about what they had bid on and how much they all spent. Every year, there was a puppy for auction and my brother and I often knew which of our classmates would wake up with a new pet hours before they did.

After the separation my mom changed her shift to food prep and spent the Saturday morning of the auction washing vegetables and stuffing mushrooms for that night. My father, perhaps out of the same stubborn pride that allowed him to stay in his home while his estranged wife and kids slept in a dingy apartment, continued to work the meat carving station each year, despite the fact that the auction fell on one of the two nights a week he'd been granted overnight visits with us.

That year he dropped us off with our babysitter: a religious woman with three of her own kids and two or three new foster children each time we visited. Their kids were imaginative and had reign of the basement where they built forts and mazes where we played for hours. When

our father arrived to pick us up after the auction, it seemed only an hour or two had passed and we pretended not to hear his voice as he sat in the dining room with Mr. and Mrs. Reed.

After our names were yelled down the stairs a handful of times and our eyelids had grown heavy with sleep, we gave in and climbed into the back of our father's car where we fell asleep amongst the canvas bags of baseball helmets and bats—overdue on their scheduled return to the park district—during the five minute drive home.

At that time of night there was a chill to the early November air as it morphed into frost and settled on the last surviving plants in the garden. Inside the old house, there was a draft that whistled through the cracks of the windows and the big front doors. I rubbed my arms while I made my way to the kitchen where we crated the dog while we were gone.

“Quest! Time to go out,” I yelled from the living room and twisted the porcelain doorknob to let myself into the kitchen, careful to do it slowly so it wouldn't fall off.

When I didn't hear a whimper of frustration from his being locked in a crate all night or the scratch of his nails against the metal bottom, I knew something was wrong.

“Guys, there's something I have to tell you,” my dad said and turned off the TV that my brother had already tuned to Sportscenter.

My brother and I were crying before he said anything else. We sat on the tiny antique couch beneath a painting of a Civil War battlefield. I remembered the previous Tuesday and how when we got home from the park, Quest had gotten into a package of brown sugar donuts we brought home from the apple orchard we visited the weekend before. My father was always firm in his punishments with the dog despite the fact that retired greyhounds were never housetrained or taught to do anything besides run, and he yanked Quest by the collar when we saw what he had done. He shoved the dog's snout into the mangled plastic and the islands of

sugar that had pooled in each slot where a donut had been, yelling and berating and punishing until I cried and pushed his hand off the dog's collar.

“You know how Quest got into those donuts last week and, Mash, you were all worried about him because dogs can't have sugar? Well he started getting really sick—didn't wanna get out of his cage, wouldn't go for walks—so I got really worried. When I brought him to the vet, it was already too late. They did everything they could but he just couldn't get through it. I was with him the whole time, though. He wasn't alone. And we're having him cremated so we can bring his ashes to the park and spread them or whatever you guys want. I'm so sorry,” he said.

His eyes—light blue like the most beautiful parts of the Great Barrier Reef I'd studied in school—swelled with tears. It was the same look he had two summers ago when we took a trip to St. Louis and stopped at his father's grave and he ran his hand over the death date on the bronze plaque.

It was true that as soon as I saw the dog had eaten the donuts, I worried they would kill him. My dad told me dogs had eaten much worse than that and still lived, but now that Quest had died, he was telling me that the donuts were to blame.

“I've been sad about it all day. I wanted to tell you before I left for the auction, but I wanted you guys to go have fun with the Reeds. You had fun, right?” he asked.

Though I didn't know it at the time, my dad already suspected that the donuts were not the cause of our dog's death. Years later I will learn that when he brought Quest to the vet, they detected unusually high levels of lead in his blood. This will not be a surprise to me, though, because I will recall the endless appointments as a child when my brother and I would have to get blood drawn to test the levels of lead in our own blood.



My father's house was built before the Civil War and there was still a high concentration of lead in the original layers of paint that couldn't be stripped from the home. Rather than move to a home more practical for his growing family, my father insisted that my mother just take us to get our blood tested. We squeezed Play-doh so hard our faces turned red until a vein protruded enough to take blood. One time the woman couldn't find a vein on Conner and rather than change the needle to prick him again, she simply dug around beneath the surface of his skin until it happened upon a vein. He was still shrieking in pain by the time we got home that night.

It was possible that the dog's immune system was compromised from years of living in a kennel with hundreds of other dogs and he wasn't strong enough to fight the poisonous levels of lead in our house. Maybe that was why he always seemed to be showing off for us when we'd take him to the park to run laps—the freedom of fresh air allowed him to get away from the house that was literally killing him. But I didn't know that at the time and I was blaming myself, wishing I had set that package of donuts on top of the fridge instead of on the counter where Quest could easily reach.

That next night that we stayed at our father's, it was Quest's birthday. My brother and I made a scrapbook of the few pictures we had of him, his official racing certificate, and his emerald collar. The following morning we stopped at a bakery where we sometimes picked up breakfast on our way to school. In the case beneath the register there were a dozen sugar cookies with pale frosting the color of the greyhound's fur and the word "Quest" written on each one. I waited for my brother to notice them, trying not to cry as I did.

My dad had called ahead and asked the woman to surprise us with them. My brother ate one while the woman boxed up the rest of the cookies. The irony of making something entirely of sugar to honor a dog that supposedly died of eating too much sugar was not lost on me. I

watched the cookies grow stale and crumbly in their box on the counter at my father's. I never ate one.

Though my father knew the real reason for Quest's death, perhaps he was such a good liar that he convinced himself of an altered truth because the next month, he decided that we should get another greyhound. That Christmas we went to the track and picked out not one, but two, retired greyhounds: a boy and a girl. The boy, 'Eugene the Jeep,' was a big blue-brindle who some of my mom's coworkers had won a good bit of money betting on. The girl, 'Odd Edie,' was a shaky, uncertain dog with deep brown eyes. Eugene—the natural athlete—was my brother's dog and Edie—the shy, nervous girl—was mine.

On Christmas morning, we opened matching fleece racing coats for the dogs. We walked them to the snowy courts, let them off their leashes, and watched as the golden numbers stitched to the backs of their coats sped past us, just as Quest had done months before.

A few months later, as pitchers and catchers began to report to spring training for another season of baseball, I was at a track meet. I'd recently discovered my talent for high jump, though I hurdled the bar rather than twisting my body over it—my own legs were as thin and shaky as the greyhounds' when they went for a walk on the snowy sidewalks near my father's house. It was cold and between turns, I shivered and placed my arms through a sweatshirt that I kept on the ground. It was just a practice track meet so the only parents who attended were the ones who volunteered as coaches. As I was about to start my event, I saw my father walking across the track and to the high jump pit. He was dressed in a white polo tucked into a pair of jogging pants. I wondered if he'd volunteered to judge since he'd competed in high jump when he was in high school. When he reached me, he nodded and stood back near the football goal post to watch me take my turn.

I ran toward the pole in a half-circle, lifting my legs over it as I approached the midpoint where it sagged lowest, and landed on my feet in the middle of the foam padding on the other side. As I walked back to warm my arms and legs between tries, I stopped to say hi. As soon as I did, I noticed his tears.

“Edie’s gone, Ash.”

My arms were wrapped in the sweatshirt, his folded across his chest. We both looked off past the rows of bleachers to outside the stadium where the sun was still up overhead—the first sign that the dark, early nights of winter were lifting. Birds edged their way across the sky: flocks making their way back after a season of migration.

“She was really sick. Eugene knew it, too. Every time I’d try to put them in their crates, he’d crawl into hers with her. I let them sleep together like that for a couple days and then it was just her time and she passed away. She was just so tiny, you know?”

I set down the sweatshirt, let the chilly air nip at my skin, and ran to the pole before starting my approach all over again.

A few weeks later, just as the Cardinals’ first season since Kile’s death was beginning, Eugene was gone, too. I didn’t ask, but my father told us that Eugene was okay, but he took him to the track so they could watch over him while we figured out what the problem was. We’d go visit him sometime soon, he told us. Maybe the volunteers at the track would even let him do a couple practice runs around his old racing track. The custom-made racing coats hung from a doorknob on the back porch and collected dust and clumps of dog hair that still blew about the concrete room.

Years later my mother will tell me that Eugene died shortly after he was returned to the track, which I sort of always knew, but wanted to imagine him still there, waiting for my brother

and me to visit him and take him for a run at the park like we used to. My dad never mentioned him again.

By baseball season, there were the ashes of two dogs in my father's closet. There was another dog, dead or alive, abandoned by our family at the overcrowded racing track. There were the sprouts of a newly planted lawn at the ranch home my mother had finally been able to purchase in the months after her divorce from my father was finalized. By baseball season, the Cardinals had new uniforms, ones that no longer displayed Kile's initials and number. By the end of two more seasons, the messages that fans and teammates scribbled on the walls of Busch Stadium for Kile will be demolished in favor of something new, bigger, and not so tarnished with the graffiti of loss.

## HOW TO RUIN YOUR BOYFRIEND'S IDEAL OF HIS FATHER

Sit in the bedroom of your on-again, off-again boyfriend in the summer before your senior year of high school. Watch the sky stretch to stratified layers of pink, orange, amber, and then watch how blackness swallows it all. Feel the humidity of a Midwest summer day level out. Feel the sweet warmth and possibility and endlessness of the night seep through the screened window where a box fan whirs from a season's worth of work.

Pour too much Bacardi Razz into a plastic cup. Add some raspberry lemonade, which you think will hide the taste and smell of the alcohol your boyfriend's older sister bought you two in exchange for a ride to her boyfriend's house. Sip from the cup, feeling the warmth and sugar of the rum coat your teeth. Feel your legs and hands begin to tingle, sending your whole body buzzing. Drinking is still a new feeling to you, one you had been opposed to for so long. The unknowable of what it meant to be drunk, to surrender a part of yourself to the drink in your hand, had kept you up many nights with worry for this boy you love who knew what it felt like when you did not. Now, it joins the two of you together. Revel in the sensation of forgetting a little bit of yourself. Reach for your boyfriend and kiss him: something you're too shy to initiate without the boldness of alcohol.

Grow bored waiting to hear which friends you will join, where you will drink until the sun comes up again. Pull a chair over to the computer and begin to search Google. Type in your name, unsure whether to spell it as 'A-S-H-L-E-Y,' the way your mom chose seventeen years ago, or 'A-S-H-L-E-E,' the way you've been spelling it since junior high. Realize it doesn't matter which way you spell it because there's no hiding from the Internet—it has combined your two identities. Find nothing interesting: results from some races you ran with your dad half a decade ago, honor roll listings, the website you made in a multimedia class for the music

booking company you started with your friends, which is how you met the freckled redhead boy who sits beside you, who dyed his side swept hair black and wore faded band t-shirts and studded belts at the time you met him.

Google your father: a bitter, divorced professor with an affinity for online dating and whose drinking led your mother to leave him a decade earlier. There is so much to learn about him, so much you wish to uncover about this mysterious man.

Feel disappointed that the only secrets the search yields are his classroom demeanor. Students at the university where he teaches write things like, “worst teacher ever,” “horrible teacher and person,” “teaches morally outrageous ideals,” “everyone knows he is the worst teacher in the justice department, even the professors.” Remember how he would take you along to his classes on the Northwest side of Chicago, walking long city blocks to his office because he refused to pay for faculty parking, to have him point to you during class and tell his students that as a third grader, you had more promise than them. Remember helping him grade stacks of blue exam books, flipping through the pages where red ink seemed to pool over every surface. Call your boyfriend over to read them with you and laugh about your father’s reviews the way you and your father used to laugh at the number of students who hadn’t passed the final for his course.

Move out of the chair so your boyfriend can Google his own father, obviously pleased with the entertainment you have provided. Sit on the floor and keep drinking as he types his father’s name and then, when that yields too many results, his father’s name and ‘Indiana:’ the state where your boyfriend resided most of his childhood.

And then there it is: an official looking document with lots of legal jargon posted on a government website. The rum has slowed your reaction and before you can lean in to distract

him or warn him not to open the link because you already fear the worst, he's downloaded a PDF dated 1999. See the case ID, a long string of letters and numbers so random that they would be impossible to memorize were they not attached to this man's name. Read phrases like 'Prescription Fraud' and 'Class D Felony' and 'EMT's certification should be suspended for six years.' Read that he stole the slips from doctors' offices and used them for Hydrocodone, that he admitted to being addicted to the substance, that he sometimes forged prescriptions while still in his EMT uniform.

Remember that, from the way he described it to you, your boyfriend's childhood was a little hazy: always moving from place to place as his mom met new men and joined families together just to break them apart when the relationship didn't work. By the time he was eight, he had three half-sisters and two ex-stepsisters. When he was twelve, his mom had moved two of his sisters and him to a big house in the north suburbs of Chicago where they joined her new husband who had five children of his own. With all the moving around, all the pseudo-relatives cycling in and out of his life, he didn't remember much.

He did remember his dad losing his job as an EMT, a job that your boyfriend had loved and admired his dad for, so much so that even now, your boyfriend was looking into community college classes that would train him to become an EMT himself. In his memory, though, his dad left the EMT job in favor of a better opportunity. It never occurred to him that he left that job and started a new one as a bank teller: a position where he struggled to pay the bills, especially now that he met a thin, chain-smoking woman who managed a Corner Bakery and who was carrying the first child he'd had in eighteen years.

But there it is in the plain black text of an electronic document: the man your boyfriend loves, perhaps the only man he could ever love that much, had lied. Not only had he lied at the

time, hidden his addiction and the reasons why your boyfriend, sturdy and baby-faced in his youth, could no longer go for ride-alongs in the ambulance or play dress up in his dad's uniform, but now that he was older, his dad had neglected to mention a secret that was so easily discovered by typing a few words on the Internet.

Watch your boyfriend's pale face fade to near-translucence as his eyes scan over the page again and again. Retreat to the bed beside the computer desk, pour another cocktail, drink from it with sureness: the source of your own father's addictions. Sit in the quiet back corner of this house where the siblings his mother has given him for now have all left for the night. Feel the glow of the backlit computer mirror the shame that burns in your cheeks. Feel guilty for crafting this now mean-spirited way to pass time. Feel sure that this foolish action will be grounds for him to break up with you yet again—to disappear from your life for days or weeks or maybe even months until he senses you can almost live without him and then to come back just before it is too late.

Prepare yourself to spend the following weeks driving around listening to sad songs—your songs together—while he decides if he can still love you or if this time is really the last. Prepare yourself to cry until the road blurs, to throw your phone in the back seat of your car just to lunge after it at the next stoplight, hoping the screen will illuminate with his name. Remember how it feels to call him, desperate to talk after weeks of silence, screened calls, unanswered messages, and have two of his friends—girls with heavy, black eye makeup and the rasp of smoke already thick in their young voices—answer for him and, when they hear the sobs in your voice when you ask for him by name, respond with “suicide hotline, please hold.” Remember that you had sent him a message minutes before that phone call: one in which you said you weren't sure that you could live if you didn't hear from him that night. Remember the sound of



his laughter erupting from the chatter in the background of the girls' operator skit and remember feeling certain that it was you he was laughing at as you let your arm go slack and the inquiries of "ma'am...are you there? Ma'am...are you a threat to yourself at this time?" became distant and muffled. Know that there will be many more nights when his desire to have fun will override his patience to be good and kind to you—a girl who is sensitive and hesitant to trust, all-too-eager to depend on someone.

But maybe hope, just a little bit, that this discovery, the evidence of his father's own struggles, will push him to learn you—the you that remains as a result of the complicated relationship with your own father—and that maybe the two of you can love—really love— and begin to understand.

## EVERY DRIVE IS ANOTHER STORY

Car rides with my mom are all “Love Shack” and “Rock Lobster” and Alanis Morissette and Hootie and the Blowfish. They’re “Meet Virginia” and ‘*I wish you would step back from that ledge, my friend*’ and learning that ‘fuck’ is a bad word because of how fast she pops the cassette out of the deck when we’re listening to *Jagged Little Pill* for the hundredth time that summer and Alanis screams, ‘*are you thinking of me when you fuck her?*’ Car rides are hoping the theme song from *Friends* comes on the radio so my brother and I can clap along to the beat just like they do on the intro to the show, which mom makes us watch every Thursday. Car rides are watching her sing along, plugging our ears when she gets too loud because her voice is terrible. They’re her tapping the steering wheel and shaking her red-brown ponytail from beneath the Indiana University hat—the school she graduated from a decade before—that she always wears when she’s running errands.

Car rides with my dad are Dolly Parton and Conway Twitty and Buddy Holly. They’re the Oak Ridge Boys and “Elvira” and my younger brother trying to do the baritone ‘*oom poppa oom poppa oom poppa mow mow*’ as we race over the train tracks. Car rides are Nelly and Destiny’s Child when dad’s feeling nice. Nelly’s okay because he’s from St. Louis just like my dad. They’re my dad putting a Band-Aid across his cheek like Nelly does and trying to rap along while my brother and I laugh. They’re him untucking his shirt from khakis when he rolls his Trooper to a stop, eager to get home from his job as a college professor, change into jogging pants for my brother’s Little League practice, pour maybe his first drink of the day.

When mom drives, it’s one stop at Taco Bell for crunchy tacos—meat, cheese, and sour cream only—and another stop at Wendy’s for chili with extra chili sauce on the side. She doesn’t mind stopping at two places to give us what we want because she feels bad. During the

week, we usually don't eat dinner until after ten because she is busy working and then driving my brother and me to sports practices. By the time we're finished, it's too late for her to cook, not that she knows how.

If dad drives, there's no way he's going to two different places just to meet our cravings. He won't even order for us in the drive-thru. He makes us lean across the seat, yell over him to the speaker outside the driver's window. My shyness is enough for me to never ask dad to stop at the drive-thrus in town. Instead, rides with him mean stopping at Whitmore's gas station on the way home from our Catholic school. It means picking up bags of cheese popcorn and Slim Jims and Starbucks bottled Frappuccinos because he's too old or too indifferent to realize or care that they actually have as much caffeine as a cup of coffee and mom would never let us drink them. Sometimes it means stopping at Bill's Custard and Café, which is a diner where we always order the grilled cheese because it's so good, but also because it comes with a free bowl of soup. I always get an extra bowl of soup—one vegetable and one chicken noodle—because I hate having to choose a side. We take handfuls of crisp garlic bread, dip them into the soups, watch the bread soak up the tomato or chicken broth, listen to dad complain about the divorce—he tells us the story the way he wants to remember it. We aren't sure who to believe. We just nod along, dunk the noodles at the surface back into the broth, laugh when we know we are supposed to laugh.

Mom hardly ever drives angry, but sometimes our dad makes her so mad that she can't help but press her foot all the way down onto the gas pedal, maybe just to see if she can, then let off it and look back at my brother and me, saying she's sorry and making sure we are buckled up. We always sit in the bucket seats in the middle row of her minivan. We always wear our seatbelts. If she is angry, it is because of something our dad has done, and it is almost always

because of something to do with his drinking, like the time when my brother wanted to play Nintendo64, but realized he had forgotten the green, floral Esprit bag that we live out of on the days we are shuffled between our father's home and the basement apartment we live in with our mom. When mom called dad to ask him to drop it off, his words were already slurred

“S’okay, the kids can go a day without the games,” he said through the phone and I could hear him because the apartment we lived in was really that small.

“No, it’s not okay, Randy. My kids want to play a game and they can’t because their father is too fucking drunk to drive the couple miles to bring it to them,” mom yelled back and hung up, throwing the cordless phone near the TV screen.

She told my brother and me to get our winter coats on—we were still too young to stay at home alone—because we were going to Randy’s house to get our bag. She only referred to him as Randy when she was mad. We got in the car. Mom sped down the residential street, past the red building where she went to grade school. She thought better of it before she even got to the country club to make the turn to go to Randy’s, so she turned around in the last driveway on our street, and jetted into our driveway once more. I didn’t blame her for getting mad with our dad—it had to be frustrating to deal with a man who’d chosen alcohol over his family—and for having to pretend to hold it all together even though she’d just barely turned thirty and had two young kids.

Dad drives angry a lot. If he’s not complaining to us about mom and her new boyfriend who he is sure was already taking her out while mom still lived in the house on Sheridan Road, he’s cursing out all the other drivers on the streets. The difference is we don’t have to wear seatbelts in dad’s car and so my brother and I often make a fort in the trunk of the Trooper amongst the lumpy canvas bags full of batting helmets and baseball bats and balls. We like to sit

near the speaker and listen to Alien Ant Farm. We like that we can look out the back window past everything that dad speeds by as he changes lanes, accelerates, calls the other people on the road names we've never heard before, and doesn't look back to check on us. We like to call him our chauffeur: a word he teaches us when he realizes that no one ever sits up front with him anymore. We hope that the space between the driver's seat and the trunk is too far for him to rant about our mother, to try to share his anger with us.

It's not just her who makes him angry, though. It's the stoplights that stay red so long that he swerves into the gas station parking lot, cuts through it, and turns out of the other entrance. Or the school bus that we get stuck behind on Wadsworth Road that stops to let children onto the bus. He starts yelling, honking, thanking God that he has children who would be smart enough to hustle on and off a bus and not hold up traffic, and then, if it takes even another couple seconds, he rolls his car onto the gravel shoulder of the road, speeds past the right side of the bus with its blinking stop sign still out, leaving a cloud of dust behind us the whole way to school.

We learn to cry when he is pulled over—he's more likely to get away without a ticket. We learn his speech to the cops—that he's a criminal justice professor, that he's had many young police officers in his courses over the years, that he understands the importance of road safety, but that he could assure them that he was not the sort of person they needed to be worried about. He usually gets off without a ticket, but it always makes us late to school, anyway.

One of mom's coworkers whose kids also go to our school catches dad speeding past a bus one morning, which isn't too surprising since it happens at least once a week. He tells our mom. She gets up early and drives us to school herself for a couple weeks. When our rides with

dad resume, he starts referring to the man who told on him as ‘Cheesy Mustache’ because the guy has a thick brown mustache with a gray-streaked birthmark through it.

“Cheesy Mustache is a wimp, you guys. A suck up who wants to get on Tina’s good side. Promise me you guys won’t ever sell out like that,” he says.

He stopped referring to Tina as our mother a long time ago.

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Car rides with Mom are her idea of bonding.

“Hey, you wanna go for a ride? Maybe stop for some ice cream?” she asks and I usually say yes because it’s fun to be out late on a school night—to drive the empty streets of our hometown with a mint chocolate chip shake in hand and the radio on.

Of course, it’s not just about the ice cream, but I can pretend like it is just as well as she can. I lick my butterscotch-coated cone, spoon my hot fudge sundae, sip my blue raspberry slush, suddenly become really interested in the swirling purple design on the cups that our favorite drive-thru, Shirl’s, uses for their treats as mom drives past her boyfriend’s house and then my dad’s place. We don’t talk about what she is doing. The rides are our secret. We just drive. I eat my ice cream—my payment for being her sidekick yet again—and she sings along to music, though she always turns down the volume dial while we creep past the houses.

Her boyfriend’s house is easy enough. She can drive past without even looking a little suspicious because he lives across the street from the apartment where we live: a fact that my father finds a little too convenient. I don’t think she did it on purpose, though, because we live in the basement of the house my mother grew up in and her parents owned the property long before my mom’s boyfriend graduated law school and moved to the suburbs to take a job as State’s Attorney. Still, I don’t think mom minds how easy it is to check up on him on nights when he

goes out for Captain and Cokes with the guys from the office, tells us not to eat dinner because he's got pizzas for us sitting next to him at the bar and that he'll be over with them soon, but forgets to call and never shows up. We drive past in search of his navy Ford Bronco, but it's usually not there. The stained glass windows at the front of his house are unremarkable with no lights inside to illuminate them. If she's really sure he isn't home, she'll make up an excuse to go inside—a book she let him borrow—and take the spare key from beneath the wheel of his grill on the back patio, walk through the empty house, leave me alone in the car to eat my ice cream. I'm not sure what she's looking for. I'm not even sure that she knows, but I think she's trying to make sure that she knows this guy—really learns him—before things get serious. I think that she still blames herself for not knowing my father better before they eloped, for getting herself and my brother and me into a situation that none of us knew how to handle. Some nights, we even roll past the parking lots of the pubs her boyfriend is known to hang out at: Booner's Tap, The Burgundy Room, American Legion, The Duck Inn. If we see his car, she lets out a knowing sigh. We drive home. She tells me that I can sleep in her bed that night.

Other nights, or sometimes the same nights, we drive the few miles to my dad's house. It's on the way to the downtown office where she works as a probation officer, so I guess if he catches us she can always say she was making a late night trip to get something from her office. He's too invested in whatever he's doing inside to notice when we drive past. His car is always in the driveway; he's the sort of alcoholic who doesn't socialize when he drinks. Drinking is business and my father takes it very seriously with a portion of his day carved out for drinking and no one around to distract his attention from it. Nights are spent with a jug of Carlos Rossi wine, which he can put on the counter in the kitchen instead of on the basement steps like he had to when we all lived at home with him.

I can tell what he's doing, can practically picture him doing it, just by seeing which lights in the house are on when we drive past. If the back parlor lights are on, he's watching a Cardinals game on TV. Maybe he's moved the wine next to his armchair so he doesn't even have to get up to refill the Red Solo cup he re-uses each night. He's wearing a paint-splattered t-shirt and jeans, but his jeans are unbuttoned and sagging down his hips as he drapes his legs over the arm of the chair. He's yelling at Tony LaRussa for making another pitching change and at Jim Edmonds for not making that catch in the outfield and at Isringhausen for not throwing a goddamn strike.

If the only light is the brass desk lamp in the computer room, he's using the dial-up Internet to frequent the dating sites he uses for years after he and my mom separate. He's taking trips up and down the back steps with the spindles of a railing he never built wobbling under his weight as he staggers past them again, guides his hands along them, another glass of wine drunker. He's sending women the picture of him in a tuxedo at his nephew's wedding. He's scrawling notes about these women—their ages and measurements and appearance—in his red grading pen, written in his all uppercase scrawl, and filing them in the card catalog he keeps beside him at the desk.

Only once do I remember my mom actually stopping during one of our night drives. It's winter in the year after we moved out of our dad's house. I am eight, maybe nine, and my brother and I are strapped into our seats in the back. Mom drives slowly at night; we aren't rushed by her need to get to work or the gym or a school function or a meeting with her divorce lawyer. We drive by my dad's house where snow buries the cherub statues in his garden, but all the lights downstairs are on: the kitchen, the front parlor, back parlor, the library. There's a car in the driveway that I don't recognize, but mom must because she turns onto Franklin St. and



into the gravel driveway instead of just driving past on Sheridan like we usually do. She shifts the car into park, but leaves it on, tells us to wait inside, that she'll just be a minute.

We're kids and minutes have a way of feeling like hours, but we're pretty sure it's been a long time, though we wish we would've looked at the time on the radio before she left so we could be sure. We think we can see shadows of people moving between the back parlor and kitchen, back and forth, but the windows we'd need to see through are covered with heavy red curtains the color of the blood on the hunting scene on the rug in his dining room.

I will later learn that my mother walks to the front door, softly lifts the knocker on the door a couple times, lets go of it. It takes a while for my father to come to the door, so she pulls the antique doorbell he has just installed, too, which sends the cluster of bells above the front doors chiming. When he gets to the door, he opens it just enough to poke his head out. Even though it is dark, she sees the way all the blood has rushed to his face and she knows that he has been drinking. He asks her what she's doing there, what she wants. She knows that he is hiding someone in there and suddenly she wants to be permitted entrance to the house.

"We're still married. This is my house, too, Randy," she says and tries to push her way past him.

It is still early in the divorce trial so she doesn't yet know that her name isn't even on the deed to the house, which is an easy thing for my dad to do considering she was twenty-one when they got married and knew nothing about owning a house. She knows that her name is on the mortgage, because she still pays half of it to him until the divorce is settled. He must know that her seeing her name on the mortgage is enough to let her think the house belongs to her. Maybe in this moment he is proud: proud that he has retained the house, banished his cheating ex-wife to a moldy basement apartment where she is dependent on the goodwill of her parents to let us

stay there rent-free, proud that she has no idea her claims of ownership to this historic house are futile.

They argue in the doorway for a while until she ducks under his arm and into the front hall of the house. She is a woman on a mission and marches through the hallway, the library, the front parlor, until she is in the living space and there is a fire burning, two glasses of chardonnay in real wine glasses—not his usual plastic cups—set on the carpet, and there is a woman lying across the floor. She has long, black hair dried out from years of coloring. Her skin is a powdery-pale and she has a large, skin-colored mole on the right side of her nose. Beside her are boxes of cards and she flips through a handful of them, placing them into different piles in front of her. They are a new set of Civil War trivia cards my father has ordered from PBS and is in the process of dividing by year. On days when we go to his house after school, we help him sort them as we sit on the couch beneath oil paintings of Civil War battlefield scenes.

“What the fuck is this?” my mom asks.

But she knows exactly what it is, and she knows this woman. Her name is Renee: a lady my father coached on a woman’s league softball team when my mom and dad were first married. My mom caught him sneaking around to see Renee while she was pregnant with me; she’d taken a drive with her best friend, found Renee’s house, made her way up the front steps with her hugely pregnant stomach covered in a floor-length dress, knocked on the door, and found them drunk on beer, his shirt untucked, his belt on the floor beside the couch.

“It’s a date, honey,” Renee says.

She gets up, takes her glass of wine and walks to the kitchen. My mom follows her. Renee goes to a big pot on the stove and begins stirring it. My father lived in Spain for two years while he was in college, so he doesn’t believe in eating dinner before ten o’clock.

“Oh, that’s suiting. The witch is making something in her cauldron,” my mom says.

Renee just laughs, but my dad has had enough and he grabs my mom by her hair, tries to drag her out of the kitchen. She starts scratching and hitting him. She’s threatening to call the cops. Working as a probation officer means she knows pretty much all of them in Lake County, and she doesn’t know if it’s better or worse to have to call an acquaintance to break up a fight between you and your ex-husband, even if it means that they’ll side with you no matter what he says. It’s all very embarrassing.

My dad gets her back into the front hallway and she spits in his face. He tries to push her out the door, but she won’t go. She has every right to be there, she says, and suddenly nothing matters besides the fact that her husband has another woman in their house.

“You see how easily you’re replaced?” my dad asks after he picks her up and slams her against the wall.

My brother begins to worry, but I tell him that she’ll be right out. I’m worried a little, too, but I remember the fights they would have in the kitchen after dinner when they were still married better than my brother does, and I figure it’s easier to pretend like it isn’t happening than to try to interfere.

My brother undoes his seatbelt, slides open the van door, and makes his way to the front door. The wooden porch has grown slick with ice since the temperatures have dropped after nightfall and he slips a little in the soccer cleats he always insists on wearing, but he must make it to the front of the house because he disappears around the corner and doesn’t come back to wave me out.

When he reaches the door, my dad has pushed my mom out, but she isn’t ready to leave, and just as my father goes to slam the door on her, she sticks her arm through, tries to push her

way back inside. The weight of the tall door crushes her arm and she curses, but she doesn't stop. My dad calls her a crazy bitch and pushes her chest, but he has a grip on her arm, too, because it's still stuck inside the door. My brother watches as she slips off the single step at the front door and lands on her back on the slick porch. Her new winter coat has torn at the seam between the sleeve and the shoulder and stuffing spills out. She grabs a handful of it and throws it at my father, who is about to close the door when he notices my brother standing to the right side of the door. Snot drips from my mother's nose and she is wailing into the still, winter night. She doesn't see my brother until after my father has.

“You son of a bitch. You beat the mother of your children in front of them? See what that does to your son,” she says.

When she is able to get up, she picks up my brother, carries him off the porch and back to the car. She sets him down and touches the spot where the coat has ripped like it is the wound from a gunshot. The cops do come and my dad is hauled away from his date in handcuffs, so my mother gets what she wants. I never leave the car, not even when the two cop cars roll up to the house, the lights of their sirens in the middle of the night as sharp as the icicles that hang from the eaves of my father's house.

I'm sure that my dad is a monster—my mother has the evidence in the torn stitches on her jacket—and I'm sure that she wouldn't mind me thinking that about him. What I'm not so sure about is why we came here in the first place, or why it is okay for her to date and not for him.

Our drives begin to include trips past Renee's house, too. She lives in a tan brick ranch behind the Taco Bell that looks like the pictures of the Alamo in my social studies textbook. It's an ugly house with dirty, pale blue awnings and a red door; I can't imagine my father spending time in such a house when he takes so much pride in the beauty of his own. We never get out of

the car again, not even on nights when every light in my father's house burns into the night, or when Renee's little car stays in the driveway until the next morning.

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We spend more time in the car with our dad as the divorce trials wear on, our parents fighting over bills down to the penny, over the smallest of belongings. In the divorce it was like all those hours he spent nursing his hangovers and neglecting the sensitive children in the world outside his bedroom had been saved in this great store of energy, and he suddenly wants to do everything with us. The desire to make someone regret breaking up her family can be a tremendous motivator. We go to batting cages, go-kart tracks, miniature golf courses, bowling alleys, parks, apple orchards, museums, movies, plays. Our mom drops us at his house every morning on her way into work and he drives us to school. He picks us up after, too.

As the divorce draws closer he sometimes shows up late to get us from school. Many days, my brother and I are the last kids to be picked up. The teachers who volunteer for traffic duty are clearing the cones that outline the pick-up path by the time he pulls the car into the lot, cuts past the parish rectory instead of driving around the new church like everyone else has to, and pulls up to where we wait, sitting on one of the curbs near the junior high wing. He thinks it's great because he's found a way to beat the system; he doesn't have to wait in the caravan of cars for hours like all those soccer moms with nothing better to do with their time, and my brother and I get to hop right in his vehicle as soon as he gets there. We don't feel the same way.

We're the ones who have to field the questions from the women who work the traffic line, who ask if they need to call someone to get us, who give us a worried look when this begins to happen a couple times a week. One time, he drives the whole five-mile stretch on Sheridan between the school and his house in the median. He just keeps driving, telling us about his day

at work, while my brother and I watch cars that have pulled into the middle lane in order to turn swerve out of his way, and he chugs along. We don't say anything, and I don't know if it's because we can't believe what's really happening or we want to see how long it takes him to notice or because talking to him about his driving would mean talking to him about his drinking, which we aren't ready to do.

Another time he forgets a whole afternoon with us. He picks us up from school, keeps us at his house until our mother gets off work and picks us up. Later that night, though, while we are eating dinner at mom's house, he calls. We see it is his number on caller ID but let it go to voicemail and his voice fills our tiny house.

"Hi, Tina," he says, more polite than he usually is with her, but his words string together so it's tough to tell when one ends and a new one begins, "I just wanted to apologize for not picking the kids up from school today. Busy day at work. Hope you got it taken care of. Sorry again. And Masher and Conner-man, I'll see you two tomorrow. Miss you kiddos."

My mom sets her plate down after the machine clicks off, her appetite lost by the idea that he had us in his car and didn't even remember. She excuses herself to go to her room and record the voicemail on the tape recorders she used for her job as a probation officer; she adds it to the evidence she is gathering for the divorce.

When he's not too drunk, when he's in a good mood, car rides are my father's stage. Even better than teaching criminal justice classes in a college classroom, he loves our car rides because he can tell us all the dirt on our mom and her family. He tells us how our mom was dating another man when she met my dad, that she kept seeing them both almost up until the point when she and my dad eloped, that she didn't even feel bad for the poor chump she broke up with.

“The guy couldn’t even blow his nose! She had to teach him how,” he tells us.

He loves this story because it is a reminder that no one my mother ever dated was as wonderful as my father, and the guy she is dating now certainly has no chance of comparing to my father’s greatness. Dad blames this man for their divorce, mostly. That and the fact that my mother is more than eighteen years younger than him. She’d rather go out and get drunk any night of the week than stay home with her successful husband and kids. My dad cites the one night a year I can remember her going out and getting drunk, sleeping in the next morning and asking him to get up with us for once: the night before Thanksgiving. He ignores all the times he stuffed a pillow over his head to keep the sound of children playing out of his sleep-and-booze-addled brain. My mom’s boyfriend, though, he had been determined to sabotage her marriage for years. There were nights when he would pretend to need her help with a defense case he was working on just as an excuse to spend time alone with my mom, my dad tells us.

He has many nicknames for this man: Baldy, Frankenstein, the dog, Mr. America, Fatso, Your Mother’s Dream Guy. He makes fun of the gleam on her boyfriend’s bald head when he drops us off at our mom’s and her boyfriend is bent over in the yard, pulling weeds and planting flowers. Sometimes my dad reaches for one of the baseball jerseys he keeps in the back of the car and stuffs it under his shirt, tucks it back in, tightens the buckle. He makes us guess who he is pretending to be, even though we know who it is as soon as he stretches his arm back and begins feeling around the seat for the extra fabric. Still, he doesn’t stop until we say it. We can’t say his name, which is Dan: a name my father doesn’t recognize. We use one of the nicknames and my dad pounds his fists against the steering wheel, laughs until the blue bulges of veins stick out in his temples. It is a game that he never tires of.

He is sure that his marriage would still be intact were it not for this man. He is so sure that I begin to question what my mother says. I know that my dad drinks, that my mother married an alcoholic and had no idea until she moved into his house the year after they had eloped, after she graduated from college, but I wonder if there weren't more factors at play in their divorce. Did the drinking lead her to find comfort in another man? Or did the drinking provide an excuse for the fact that she enjoyed the company of a man who she would not have been able to resist anyways?

One day, my dad drives us to Fun Harbor: an arcade in a defunct shopping mall. We love Fun Harbor because the games are cheap and my brother and I have gotten really good at Mortal Kombat in the months we've been going there. We save our tickets each time rather than cashing them in because we're saving for a raft that will fit a family of four so we can take a whitewater rafting trips in the Ozarks like our dad did with his family when he was growing up. We count our tickets at the end of each visit, double check the price of the raft behind the ticket counter, and write down how many more tickets we need until we can buy it. This day when we leave, instead of driving home, our dad drives around the abandoned shopping center. He stops in a spot outside of Carson's, the department store where we used to buy all the ornaments for the five Christmas trees our family would get each year. He gets out of the car, takes his wallet and keys and leaves us in there without any music or air conditioning.

We are the only car in the lot until a black car circles past us twice and pulls into a spot a few yards away from where my father stands. My father walks to the car, shakes hands with a man in a suit and dark sunglasses. The man hands my father a couple sheets of paper. They talk for a few minutes. My father tucks the papers under his crossed arms, shakes his head the longer the man beside him talks. When he returns to the car, he shoves the papers under the driver's



seat, where he has taken to keeping cups of tomato juice mixed with vodka, too. We speed off. I will learn that the man is a private detective he has hired to find out if my mother is seeing Dan. I'm not sure why my father, normally very frugal, pays a good bit of money to find out something he already knows. Still, the man gives him proof—grainy photos of my mother and Dan having drinks at a bar near their offices, of her leaving his house and walking across the street to our apartment in her pajamas—that he believes he will be able to use in court in order to gain custody of us.

Years later, he will tell me that the private detective encouraged him to do some spying of his own. One night when my brother and I stay at his house, he will disappear for an hour or so, which we are used to—almost relieved—by then. He will drive to our mother's apartment, walk around the perimeter of it and peer into the window wells that are level with the ground. He will see my mother and this man in the antique bed my father finally decided to give her after several mediation meetings, though not before he took a blowtorch to the wood he had so carefully sanded and varnished in his workshop years before. He will spit on the window, his feet hidden from their view by the rocks that piled up against the sides of the house, and return to his house. When my brother and I wake in the morning, a Post-It note with the word 'whore' will be plastered across my mother's face in our family portrait above the mantle.

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Drives with my mother are to Milwaukee or Madison or Waukesha for the basketball tournaments my brother plays in with increasing frequency. I am thirteen and she relishes my company in a way that she couldn't when I was younger. I am beginning to understand the extent of my father's alcoholism. She is glad to have a confidante—someone on the inside—who not only doesn't blame her for her decision to leave, but who understands. She asks me to

tag along to these tournaments because the long hours between games give us time to talk. She tells me of all the times she worried about his drinking, the many strikes he tallied against himself before she finally left. She tells me how he used to do cocaine when he worked as a bartender in Milwaukee to finance graduate school. She tells me more than a thirteen-year-old should know.

We drive to the malls in whatever town we have found ourselves in that weekend and we shop. She has always loved to shop, which is one of the things her and my father would fight about often, but I feel that the more things I can find around my father's house, the more I tell her about life with him, the more I listen to her stories, the more clothes I will receive. We drive back to the hotel each night, the trunk brimming with shopping bags, new things that she believes will heal me, or her, or us.

Drives with my father are long trips to Lake Geneva, St. Louis, Mississippi. We go to meet the women he has been dating online. I worry that he will scare them away if he brings my brother and me with, but I figure if they can put up with him, we're not so much more to deal with. I feel the need to impress these women: to be the smartest, most polite, well-spoken version of myself. We visit the Shedd Aquarium, watch a dolphin show with a girl named Jamie who could become our sister and her mother, Sheila, who is a nurse in downstate Illinois who my father has been talking to for months. Jamie teaches us how to make dream-catchers. She plays catch with my brother and makes lists of cute celebrity boys with me. My brother and I let ourselves get excited about having another family for just a minute, though we know no one will ever move into that house on Sheridan Road with our dad.

A few weeks later, we drive to Lake Geneva for Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Sheila has brought her older daughter who is about to get married. The two of them sit near the fireplace in

the lobby of the hotel with piles of papers in front of them, planning the wedding and drinking champagne while my dad takes us kids ice-skating on the pond outside. Later that night, we are all in the hotel room, but no one is really talking. We suggest that we play Spoons—a card game that Sheila’s younger daughter loved, that we all played for hours when we saw them last—but the women say they are tired and go to sleep. My dad doesn’t see Sheila again after that weekend and I can’t help but think my brother and I are to blame.

We drive to Mississippi one summer while I am in junior high. It is a long trip—twelve hours—and we plan it for weeks. My father buys a portable TV with a DVD player so we can watch movies from the backseat during the drive. We are going to meet Carla: another nurse my father has met online. I am not excited about the trip because things with Sheila ended so badly and we will be staying in this woman’s house with her and her two young kids so if it begins to get awkward, we have no escape, especially since dad seems to have no grasp of when a situation becomes uncomfortable. It is also the beginning of August; we don’t have air conditioning in the car and I hear that it is unbearably hot in Mississippi at this time of year. We make the drive in two days. My brother and I want to complain more, to ask how much longer to this lady’s house, but it’s the first time in a long time that our dad doesn’t fill the long stretches of highway with gossip about our mother. When we arrive at Carla’s house, she greets us with pierogis and pizza. She learns that I have been asking for the Ashlee Simpson CD, released earlier that day, and she and I drive for hours until we find a Walmart that hasn’t sold out.

By the end of the week, it feels as if we have made a family in Mississippi. We leave the DVD player off on the drive back to Illinois. We tell stories of Carla and her family and we offer the rooms in our dad’s house to her kids. We make plans for them to join us in Illinois, rearrange our lives to fit them, though they never make the long trip to come see us.

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When I'm sixteen and get my driver's permit, drives with my mother are stressful, which is pretty much how I would describe our whole relationship these days. She hates the boys I date, hates the way I sneak out of the house to see them in the middle of the night, how I argue with her when she tells me that I need to get off the phone and go to bed. We try to log some of the fifty hours that I need to get my license, but we never get more than a couple miles from home before we start to argue. I try to do everything perfectly. I signal when I change lanes, I check my speed constantly, look at my rearview mirror before I do anything, brake and accelerate slowly, don't spend my time fidgeting with the dials on the radio and instead keep my eyes on the road. Whatever I do is never good enough for her, just like the straight As I receive in school. I can always do better, she tells me.

One night, we're trying to drive for an hour or so, but I'm barely out of our neighborhood, just past the hotel her friend owns, when I signal to make a turn, slow down to take it, and she grabs my arm, presses her feet into the carpet, and tells me that I didn't give the person behind us enough notice and that I could've killed us both. I've turned into a neighborhood and when she starts yelling, I slam on the brakes, throw the gear into park, and jump out of the van. I start to walk home and she lets me get down the block before she drives after me. We don't log any more driving hours together after that.

Driving with my dad is a little scary because he trusts me way too much too soon. I never thought I wanted to drive, so while all my other friends turned fifteen and enrolled in private driving schools, I ignored my age, and didn't enroll in Driver's Ed until I was looking to fill a gap in my schedule during the spring of my sophomore year. I get my driver's permit one day during winter break that year and my dad is ready to put me to the test. He is supposed to

drop me off at my mom's as soon as we get the permit, but he pulls to the shoulder when he turns onto her road and tells me to get out of the car. We switch seats. I've never been in the driver's seat of a car and I have no idea what I'm doing. He doesn't give me any guidance, just tells me to go for it, so I do. We make our way very slowly down my mother's street, which is a dead-end, so even though I'm terrified, I don't feel like I have much of an audience and I guide us into her driveway clumsily.

My dad then changes his mind. My friend Sara is supposed to be getting a ride to my house in a half hour, but he tells me to call her and let her know that we will pick her up since she lives in a subdivision a couple miles from my house. I don't think my lessons should be advancing so quickly, but he assures me I am ready to take the main roads despite the fact that it's rush hour and there will be plenty of other cars out there. My legs are shaking, but he won't switch seats with me again and I manage to get us to Sara's house, driving maybe fifteen miles per hour the whole way. I don't yet know that his license has been suspended for years or that he's been driving illegally because of the DUIs. I log almost all of my permit hours with him and he signs off on them like nothing is wrong.

When the day comes to get my license, my dad drives me to the DMV. I have earned high marks on my written and driving tests in Driver's Ed, so I will likely not have to take the license test, but they do test some kids at random, so there is a chance. We pull into the DMV lot and my dad gets out of the car. I stay back, climb into the driver's seat to make sure that I am comfortable behind the wheel, that I remember where all the buttons and gears are that I will need if I have to take the test. I look under the seat for the bar that will let me move it forward so my feet touch the pedals and I find a plastic cup. It is filled with clear liquid that has sloshed over the top during the drive and it darkens the carpet around it. I put my head between my legs,

lift the cup to my face to smell it without my dad noticing as he waits outside the car: vodka. I'm too embarrassed to dump it out in front of him, too stunned by his brazenness to ask him if he wants me to be the first person in history to get a DUI during my license test, too exhausted by the endless presence of his drinking. I worry that I will have to take the test and that I'll fail it because I'll spend the whole time thinking about the cup of vodka beneath my feet. I don't have to take the test. He sits with me while my license is printed. I insist on driving. I take us to my boyfriend's house and get out of the car once I have parked it across the street.

"I want you to think about what you could have done today," I say, and I hand my father the keys.

It is the first time I have even alluded to his drinking, though it will not be the last. Perhaps it is the knowledge that I can now drive, that I can get up and leave if I'm not happy with something, that I don't have to sit in the backseat and just tolerate it like I have for years, that prompts my warning. I leave my father to drive the half hour home with his own poor decisions.

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Driving brings with it an independence that I didn't know I needed. I can leave my mother's house in the middle of the night by sneaking out the window of my room at the back of the house, putting the silver minivan I have inherited into neutral, and rolling down the sloping driveway in silence. I can see the boyfriend who I am sure will be the one to rescue me from all of the drama of my family whenever I want. I can come up with other places to be, other things to do, when my father asks to see me. But when I discover that he doesn't have a license and has forged my signature on the insurance and title for the new car he buys during my senior year, I

become his chauffeur, though he sits in the front seat with me. I drive him to doctor's appointments, the grocery store, rehab.

Then, I am twenty-two and I move across the country. I am no longer around to enable my father or to take long, late night drives with my mother as she tries to keep tabs on all the men who have let her down. She still makes the drives, though she does them alone now.

She calls me with news of the latest sightings of my father—when he walks his Irish Setter at the park, when she runs into him at the post office on her lunch break, when he appears in her office to meet with his probation officer after he gets out of jail for driving on a revoked license. She calls me with news of the different cars that remain in his driveway for days or weeks. She tells me of the young women she sees leaving his house with suitcases. They wear tiny pairs of jean shorts and backless tank tops and talk into their phones, well-manicured hands holding them to their faces. She's sure they're prostitutes. I listen to her, ask the right questions when she pauses, laugh when I should. My boyfriend can hear her on the other line. He shakes his head as I continue to listen to her ranting.

“Why does she care so much?” he asks when I finally hang up.

I'm not sure. I don't even think I care anymore. But she is still driving the same routes we drove decades earlier, building a case that she'll never be able to present.

“I think it's because she's still looking for answers to how she could be so wrong about someone for so long. She's still trying to understand how she could marry a man and have kids with him when she didn't know anything about the person he was,” I say after I think about it for a while.

And it's true: years of driving around with my father and I still don't understand. We've spent so much time with him, his two hands on the wheel, racing toward what is ahead, and I'm still trying to make sense of what we have passed.



## WHAT WE HIDE

We name our baby Ava. Ava Autumn.

There is no baby, but I don't tell Kirk that. We have been together for a year and a half, hiding our relationship for a year of that time. He thinks I have stopped taking my birth control because we decide to have a child, but I haven't. He doesn't consider that we are not allowed to see each other, and any time that we do have together requires planning, sneaking, deception. I wonder how he will help care of the baby when she comes; we are sure it is a girl. We are so sure that I forget there isn't really a baby.

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Kirk's desire was simple enough: he wanted sex. My opposition was equally uncomplicated: I did not. The pressuring to have sex began three days into our relationship and was a flow of complaints, guilt trips, and ploys to convince me otherwise. Bouquets of flowers and confessions of love could not win me over, nor could attempts to push me past my well-defined boundaries, my vow that neither of us would remove our clothes.

After dinners with Kirk's family, he and I often headed to his basement. He turned a movie on the projector screen, but it never mattered what it was. As soon as it started, we were on top of each other, kissing sloppily, passionately, and with urgency until it was time to bring me home at ten o'clock. At my house, we were not privileged with the same amount of privacy.

My mom caught us in the middle of our routine one night, thrusting against each other on the trampoline in my backyard. She must have watched us through the large back window, surveying the way I ravenously devoured his lips with my own, the way my hips rolled into his pelvic bone. When she had seen enough, my name pierced through the stiff suburban air and I rolled off him, readjusted my pants, shirt, hair, and sulked over to her, standing purposefully in

the doorway and feeling like the child I pretended not to be. She scolded me and after that, Kirk and I reserved our hormonal displays of affection for nights in his basement since he was no longer welcome at my house. If his parents knew our secret, they never let on.

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On afternoons when his parents aren't home, we have sex in his bedroom. The beta fish I bought Kirk for Christmas that year swims knots from his nightstand. I purchased the fish on a trip to the mall with friends and left it at one of their houses with a note next to the fishbowl so he could pick it up without my mother knowing. His name is Otto. Kirk has never had a pet, but we care for Otto as if he is a real pet, like a dog or cat. Sometimes we even care for him like he is the fingerling we swear is growing inside me. We reach over to the bowl, rub our fingertips up and down as if we're scratching the swollen, spotted belly of a kitten. Sometimes Kirk grabs one of the guitars that rest against the desk under the skylight in his room and makes up songs for the fish, or the baby, or sometimes both. When we break-up for good, he lights the fish on fire—his satiny scales combusting in light. I know because he sends me a video of it: the last frame the charred carcass of the fish against neon rocks.

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I was fifteen when we began dating; he was a year older. Kirk was the first real boyfriend I had—"real" meaning he gave some sort of tangibility to the word "love." "Real" meaning he called my cellphone every Saturday morning and then, when I didn't answer, he called my house, asking my mother to wake me so we could start the nonstop communication that was our life together. "Real" meant he could drive my friends and me to the mall and the movie theater across the street from the wealthy neighborhood where he lived because he was white, not Puerto Rican like the boy I dated before him who lived in a paint-stripped apartment

with plywood walkways. For him, “real” also meant that our feelings of love needed to take on a physical aspect that I wasn’t ready for.

Each time we were in his basement he tried to unbutton my pants as if I was unaware of the prolonged fidgeting of his fingers near my waist or the eager slide of his hands underneath my shirt, to which I playfully smiled and pulled his hand away from whatever unfamiliar territory it tried to explore.

“Not now,” I said, and continued kissing him fervently on his face, ears, and neck.

The truth was I enjoyed making out with Kirk, more than I cared even to admit to him. I liked how desirable it made me feel—the way my lips swelled up, turning red and pouty after hours of kissing, the unfamiliar tingling between my legs, the uncontrollable way his hands ran over my body. All of it was new and exciting, but for me, our exploration of one another did not have to go past this. The time I spent teasing him with our physical closeness was experimental for me, but torturous for him.

As our first summer together faded out, I pushed Kirk to the edge, doing everything and nothing at once with him in the darkness, grinding up against him for hours and refusing his attempts to remove so much as a sock from either of our bodies.

I now know that I had two reasons for not wanting to have sex with him; I had played up the mystery, transforming it into something monumentally terrifying. I had read enough to get the idea that sex, at least for the first time, hurt. And I knew that if it had been the right thing to do, I would have felt enough desire in that basement with him to bring me to that point. A physical attraction that could not be denied, one that would propel me to surpass my virginity head-on, embracing the sexual aspect of my relationship with a lusty determination I had not yet felt, something I would not feel toward him while we dated.

*Rape.* The word entered my mind as we dropped off the second bunch of kids on the bus route home from my high school on the last day I would ever be permitted to see Kirk. The first time I heard it in regards to my situation was earlier in the day when I talked to my best friend, Sara. The word tumbled out of her mouth harshly, and I was startled to realize that people would be so quick to classify what happened to me as exactly that. Sara knew Kirk, became friends with him out of necessity, and had, I thought, begun to genuinely like him.

“This has nothing to do with me liking him or not. He hurt you and that isn’t okay. No means no,” she said.

I had definitely said no: there was no arguing that.

As the bus neared my neighborhood, I wanted to reach out, trace the word onto the foggy window and erase it with my fist. A word small enough to be written on a school bus window without being noticed by the boys around me, but one that carried weight. Once the word was in my mind, the images from that night came easily. A normal night, holding hands as we walked about the mall. Him buying me a new shirt. Me buying him more food than anyone besides a sixteen-year-old boy could eat. His mention that his parents were out of town. I knew this, of course. Once we were done eating, he told me that we would be stopping by his house in the neighborhood across the street from the mall.

“I just have to run in and get something. We’ll be quick,” he said.

I reminded him that his mom told us we were not to go back there, knowing we may use the rare opportunity to be alone.

We pulled up to the circular driveway and he went into the house without stopping to open my door. I opened it myself; the fall air felt cooler than usual, but I followed him. I stood at the doorway. He had already made his way into the darkness of the empty house. The tree in

the front yard was bare, devoid of its fall leaves, and its menacing arms cast shadows onto the dining room table. I couldn't hear Kirk upstairs. I wanted to go back to the car to wait for him, but it had locked behind me. I waited in the hallway, surveying the empty house, my own life in it. When Kirk didn't return I slipped my pink boots off, placing them next to the door. I paused on the first step of the wide oak staircase and willed myself upstairs to his room. I told myself I would find him, ask him to drive me home immediately, promise to have my mom drop me off to see him the next day as soon as I was done with school.

I found him alone in his room. I could barely make out the features of his blemished face beneath shaggy golden hair. He smiled at me and stood, meeting my gaze eye-to-eye. Although he was a year older and much bulkier, he was only my height. He seemed overpowering now regardless of his short stature. The moonlight created illusory muscles on his un-toned body. He pushed me onto the bed behind him, unmade from earlier that morning. I sat straight on the edge of it. He pulled me up until I was lying on the bed, my face turned to the side, inhaling the uniquely boyish scent of sweat and too-much cologne. I still had my coat on. The fur hood jutted out to the side, each sharp inhale brought a mouthful of artificial fluff with it. My breath was hot and shallow. He pulled at my pants, undiscouraged by my stiff body. The change inside my pockets from our earlier fast food meal came loose as my pants did, crashing onto the floor: the only sound in an empty house.

He worked his way to my underwear, pulling them down my icy legs, tossing them to the side of his bed. I shook my head against the pillow, mussing my hair with each move. I didn't say anything, not yet, but I knew he noticed the way my head darted from side to side, eyes shifting in defense. When he stood up to take his shirt off, I finally closed them. I didn't aid him

in the process, but I didn't put up a fight, either. The excitement I used to feel being alone with him vanished because there was nothing left to wait for. This was it.

"No," I said over and over.

The word got quieter and less demanding each time. I was fifteen and desperately wanted to be in love, this much I knew. For Kirk, sex came with love, and I thought that maybe that should be okay with me if I wanted love, too. But in that moment, in that room, with that person, I couldn't let my guard down. I forfeited my blissful visions of life in that house; I wished to be in my own home, even if it meant waiting up alone for my mom and brother to return from sports practices each night.

But I didn't hurt him, either. It was a conversation we had too many times, an argument I didn't care to have once more only to be disrespected again, so I just lie there. I returned to my chant, giving him the chance to change his mind before it was too late.

"No."

His boxers came off.

"No."

His body was on top of mine. I was glad he left my shirt on so I couldn't feel the warmth of his chest. The weight of it was enough.

"No."

He tried to force himself into me. I was dry and unmoving. At the head of the bed I bit my lip.

"No."

He thrust inside me, lightly at first and then more rough. He wanted me to look at him, to succumb to the imagined passion of the moment and embrace it with him, but I didn't, and he

continued anyways. He grunted between heavy breaths, looking down at the wall behind me. If it weren't for the moonlight, I might have thought he was looking at me. Sweat separated the sheet of hair against his forehead and some of it dripped onto my face, but I was thinking of the sound the coins made when they hit the floor and how I didn't care if I got them back.

The pain was gone, only an annoying, rubbing sensation remained. He persisted. I looked around the room, seeking out the clothes that should've still been on my body. My wandering eyes weren't a distraction to him and I found my pants next to the bookshelf, atop a damp towel from his shower that morning. I couldn't see my underwear, but I was sure it was at the foot of the bed, tangled with the sheets he tossed aside. I was thinking about how if we hadn't gone back there, everything would've been fine. After what seemed like an hour, he finished, put his clothes back on, and finally looked at me. Refusing to meet his gaze for the rest of the night, I had him drive me home in silence. Though I had been mad—mad enough not to talk to him the rest of the night—I wasn't sure that what had happened to me counted as rape.

—

Maybe it's because I'm young or because I want a great story to tell or because I synonymize complication and love, but Kirk and I can't stay apart. I spend many nights scrolling through old emails, reading our proclamations of love, our certainty of our future together when neither of us could even be sure of the next day's events. I tell my mom that we were having sex regularly before he raped me. I tell her that I just didn't want to have sex that night because I was mad at him because we weren't supposed to be at his house since his parents were out of town. I lie.

I think of him going to parties in the mansions of Chicago's North Shore, bringing water bottles of alcohol for the rich high school girls who swig from them until they have an excuse to

press their willowy bodies to his. Kirk tells me about having sex with these girls—the way they’ll do anything for alcohol, how they’ll sleep with him and then one of his friends at the same party like it doesn’t mean anything. To me, it does. I want to keep him safe from the environment our break-up brought him into. I want to prove to him that we can somehow defy our parents’ wishes and make our relationship work, so I begin seeing him again.

We meet in parks, parking lots, campgrounds. We meet at his house after school and before his parents return home from work. We meet in the early hours of morning—me burrowing into the smoky smell of his hoodie, saturated from another bonfire—while we lay in my bedroom. We pass notes between his younger brother, an unwilling accomplice who frowns each time I approach him in the hallways of our high school with a sheet of notebook paper pressed to my palm. We make sure that we cannot have a life without the other. We sabotage. We betray. We swear our love for each other.

—

On the bus the night after Kirk first had sex with me at his house, I turned toward the window, looked past the raindrops that stuck to the plate-glass, and onto the street below. I reached for my phone and sent Kirk a message asking why I should reconsider ending our relationship.

“Because I love you and can’t live without you. You’re more important than the air I breathe,” he said.

It was an attempt, but a half-hearted one, and I realized in his answer that he didn’t see anything wrong in what he did.

Because sex doesn’t seem like anything at the time: blood rushing to your head, sweat on the small of your back, a few moments of sharp pain, and then it’s gone. But when it’s not



something you want, and it happens anyway, it takes something from you. When you hear others call it rape, when you are cast into an unwanted category of girls who have been raped, when no matter how many times you promise that “it’s not like it was bloody or violent or anything, it’s just that my boyfriend had sex with me and I didn’t want it,” you are unsure what this new experience means for you, how it changes the way you define yourself. You unwillingly free yourself from the future you made with this person because you decide you can’t be with someone who can only see you as an object, even if only for those few minutes when he had you alone in his room for the first time.

It is the rainstorm of late fall, corrupting the sky with fat raindrops, casting a gray façade over everything until, like always, it passes. But while it’s there, there’s always the worry that it could last forever. That the dreariness it brings with it will decide to root itself in your life forever, placing you in a perpetual storm without ever asking how you feel about it.

On that day, I thought the storm would last forever. I peeked out the window at the deepening skies above me and felt I’d been cast into a category that didn’t quite fit. I was in love with Kirk, but I hadn’t wanted to have sex, and I did anyways. I wasn’t sure at the time if it was rape, but even then I knew Kirk hadn’t treated me like the girl he loved, and he destroyed the feelings of safety I had in his home. I was angry with him for not listening to me, for not being able to wait until I was ready, even if I didn’t know when that would be, but I also knew I could leave him without carrying the guilt of breaking his heart on my conscience. Because I knew that when I got off the bus that day and told my mom what happened, she would make the decision for me.

More than anything, I was angry for the way the sky had opened up that day: a cracked gray portrait of clouds and rain, because I knew it would forever symbolize emotional turmoil, tainting the way I told the story, even though that was the last thing I wanted.

—

The next boy I date, I give my real virginity to. I make this distinction between losing my virginity and losing my “real” virginity early on, but often try to decide which one counts. What story do you tell when that question is asked? Tyler and I begin dating a few months after Kirk rapes me—the forevers Kirk and I promised each other made more difficult by the fact that my mom forbids me from seeing or talking to him. Most of the communication Kirk and I had in the months before I get a boyfriend was done via email—me quietly pressing down on the keys of our desktop computer as my mom slept in her bed ten feet away from the desk where I sat. It surprises me that I’m willing to share this part of myself with Tyler when I was so opposed to doing so with Kirk, and it makes me wonder if Kirk had just waited a couple months, things would have ended differently.

The night I decide to have sex for the first time happens to be Kirk’s birthday. I send Kirk a quick message to wish him a happy birthday while I wait in silence for the other boy—knees pulled to my chest—on the floor beside the window of my room. When Tyler arrives, I slide the window open and watch him straddle the frame of it as he tries to enter. In the morning I wake to use the bathroom and make sure my mom is still asleep. I notice blood matted on the lavender velvet blanket on which we slept. It reminds me of the time our first cat had given birth to her litter in the antique tub at my father’s house—the way the tabby’s orange fur became damp and tousled with blood. When I return to my room, I fold the edge of the blanket over to

hide this from Tyler's view, but I take it as affirmation that this is the time that counts. This is the story I can tell everyone.

When I begin seeing Kirk again, everything about Tyler becomes the story I tell everyone. He is an alibi. Kirk is my secret.

After Kirk and I have sex we stare in the bathroom mirror, naked together. I pretend to see the fleshier bits of my stick-thin frame and point them out to him. He cradles my stomach. We lock eyes in the mirror and talk about how no one will be able to keep us apart when the baby comes.

Kirk hates my mother; he blames her for destroying our relationship. I'm not sure if he thinks the baby will make it impossible for her to keep him out of my life, but I think he relishes the idea of my mother having to see something that is a part of him for the rest of her life. Maybe he imagines my mom peering into the pale blue eyes of the baby, knowing they are his and that the baby is a result of the very thing that led her to keep us apart in the first place.

I think I could be a mother. I arrange my high school schedule so I could graduate a year early, just in case. I research pre-med programs in Chicago. I want to be a dermatologist. I have a fantasy of graduating high school and moving to the city where I can have the baby and care for her in my own apartment. I think Kirk would join me, though I'm not sure what sort of father he would be, or if it would even matter whether or not he came with. Ultimately I know my mom would never let me raise a child alone; even if the baby was Kirk's, she would raise her like her own. Still it's nice for me to imagine an alternate life—one that doesn't require so much uncertainty and deceit.

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Years later Kirk will be diagnosed with schizophrenia. An illness that runs in his family, his will be triggered by the drugs he tries when he and I have ended our relationship for good: two years after we originally started dating. By then it will be obvious that there is no baby. That there never was. I will want to think back, to identify when he reached the point where he couldn't go back, or if there was no avoiding what happened to him, just like there was no avoiding the end of our relationship. I will feel responsible for his diagnosis, for the chaos of our relationship, and for the hurt we inflicted on each other. I will also be angry with him for the things he did to me, but more than that, for the ways he hurt himself and brought about his illness.

I will unzip the stomach of the stuffed animal he gave me the week before that night in his bedroom that changed our relationship. It is a large yellow fish and in it are the mementos of the secret part of our relationship: the CDs, poems, letters, song lyrics of unending love. The sort of things you keep hidden.

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Kirk drives me home from school sometimes—only when we know no one is at my house, but even then he parks on a perpendicular street and I walk the long driveway to my house alone. One day, we stop at a gas station just outside the Six Flags in our town. I grab his aviator sunglasses that are set in one of the cup holders and put them on, worried someone will see the two of us together; we are each other's biggest secret. He walks inside to pay and I beg for Doritos from the passenger window, rubbing my stomach for emphasis. He brings me back two bags—two different flavors—since he is unsure which one Ava will prefer. When we reach my neighborhood, he pops out the CD that has been playing on the stereo. He slips it into a sleeve with a homemade cover. Music is our way of communicating with one another—of

saying the things we could never let anyone know we say to each other. We look the lyrics up on the Internet and write them by hand for one another, the hours of writing until our hands cramp meaning more than if we had just typed them, but also the idea that typing them leaves a greater chance that we will be caught. This one is full of songs for the baby.

## ON MY FIRST TIME DRINKING

Bacardi O. Orange juice. Not quite chilled—the handle of alcohol in a halo of condensation, cap off, on the coffee table. Me on the tattered couch. Surrounded by not-quite acquaintances who stagger themselves in groups about the large room with high wooden rafters and a whirring ceiling fan: an extra living space converted to a bedroom suite for the oldest child in this family’s home. They are my boyfriend Tyler’s friends, kids from his high school who would’ve been happy to be anywhere drinking unsupervised for the night. They are the perfect audience: already drunk and oblivious to the fact that I’m about to do something I have objected to for as long as I can remember, something that even the thought of had the power to turn my stomach and make me sick with uncertainty and fear.

The glass door that leads to the balcony and back steps is left open for the kids who smoke cigarettes clumsily until the butts slip from their hands, still alight, onto a floor of mud-trodden leaves. The coolness of Midwestern October breezes in through the open door. It brings with it the crackling sounds of a well-fed bonfire that reaches toward the tops of the lakeside houses, the pressing film of smoke, and the loose chatter of parents who have forgotten their responsibilities for the night.

Tyler approaches me—a generously poured cocktail disguised in a solo cup in his hand, a smirk on his face. It’s an argument we’ve had many times: his drinking, my vow not to drink. Yet here we are. I think he’s just excited that he no longer has to hide his drinking, to conceal the hushed slur I have learned to distinguish when he calls me to say goodnight, but I wonder if he’s excited to see how the alcohol changes me, too.

My face flushes hot: patchy pink burning against pale skin. My ears thrum with heightened awareness. *Remember this*, the pulsing that reverberates in my body tells me.

This is the story I will tell everyone.

—

It was a month earlier in a parking lot in the industrial park near my house when I really drank for the first time. When I was almost positive my mother was asleep, I slid the window of my bedroom open—my long legs stretched for the mud where seedlings of grass sprouted from the ground we broke years before so my uncle could build the addition to our home. I hugged the line of trees on the far side of our lot, snuck down the slope of our large front yard. Once I was off the grass, I zigzagged along the dead end road to avoid setting off the slumbering streetlights, cut through the brush at the end of the street, and hopped down from the concrete barrier where a red SUV was waiting for me.

The only car in a row of spaces, it was tucked away from the road and ensconced in shadow by the thick shrubbery. A water bottle of vodka was in one of my hands, a jug of Hawaiian Punch in the other. Crumpled McDonald's bags scattered the floor of the vehicle. I sat cross-legged in the backseat. I was nearly naked—the paleness of my skin swathed in the dim glow of the streetlamp. Kirk, the boy who raped me a year before, stood outside in his boxers. Our meeting place was familiar—we had been sneaking around to see each other for months—but the circumstances, my first time drinking, were new.

I held the weight of these two bottles awkwardly, trying to quiet the doubts I had about this moment. I worried about the heaviness of the jug of juice—unsure if I would be able to bring it to my mouth in time to wash down the taste of the foreign liquid. I was uncertain about so much more than that, but that worry seemed the most manageable so it was the one I focused on.

“I don’t think I can do it!” I shouted through the closed window, giddy with the nerves of the unknowable.

“Sure you can. Just don’t think about it,” he answered me with his back turned.

The moles that dotted his back created a constellation. I tried to make out its different shapes as I sat inside the car, watching the way he bobbed up and down in anticipation of being invited back in. Seeing Kirk shirtless was still new to me, a curiosity that carried with it the complexity of my feelings for him, the simultaneous allure and hesitation that he held for me.

The night he made me have sex with him more than a year earlier was the first time I had seen him with his shirt off. It had scared me then—the sight of his un-toned, unfamiliar body, the bulk of it pressing up against my own. Now when I saw him with his shirt off as I did many weekends when we were both able to come up with excuses to sneak away or end our obligations early to spend time together, I felt a nervous sort of excitement: the concealed power of the body in front of me, the trouble we could each get in if we were caught together. From inside the car, the view of his bare back thrilled me. It gave me the familiar feeling of desire that I had felt for him that first summer in his basement when I first learned what it meant to have someone lust for me and everything my mind and body offered. Though the barrier of our clothes had been removed, the closed door of the car separated us and I liked to think that edged away some of my nerves.

“It smells so bad!” I said and scrunched my nose near the lip of the water bottle even though he couldn’t see the face I was making.

He turned his head, his shaggy, dirty blond hair catching the light from the streetlamp so the top of his head sparkled.

“Don’t look at me!” I yelled.



He returned his gaze to the front and shrugged at my prolonging of the situation.

I repeated this process a few more times. Each time I thought I was actually going to do it. I could picture myself drinking from the water bottle, following it with a gulp of fruit juice, letting the alcohol gradually conquer my body until I was no longer a fortress. But I couldn't actually break that barrier. The vodka returned to rest in the crook of my inner knee untouched.

—

While sitting on the couch, I take the cup, clasp my hands around it. Tyler peers at me beneath a raccoon mask of freckles. I press the ridge of the cup to my lips: a tiny, open-mouthed kiss. I lock eyes with him—my chestnut to his blue—and look just long enough to convey the right amount of nervousness. As far as he knows, this is the first time I will ever take a sip of alcohol. In this room with these people: a public surrendering of my beliefs.

Between my father's alcoholism and my Catholic education, my opposition to drinking was the first firm opinion I remember having. Unlike our public school counterparts, my friends and I had no interest in experimenting with substances. We steadfastly defended our repulsion for drinking, letting others know that we didn't need to depend on alcohol to have fun. We asked boyfriends to quit drinking for us and when that didn't happen, we asked them to pretend as if they didn't drink and not to talk to us when they did.

Tyler and I have been dating for six months, and there have probably been a dozen instances when I suspected him of drinking behind my back. There were nights I spent nauseous with the sad uncertainty of him succumbing to the power of something outside his own control, of hanging out with other people under the influence. One time he showed up two hours late to a concert I hosted in my friend's basement smelling like alcohol and blaming it on too much mouthwash. My friend slapped him across the face when she confirmed my suspicion that he'd

been drinking.

For my friends and me, the idea of giving control of ourselves to some burning elixir made our stomachs knot in uncertainty, terror. But as teenagers tend to do, we changed our minds. My decision to drink on this night comes from a desire to give something to Tyler. It's important to him that we're able to share the feeling of drinking together, to experience the way it changes our thoughts, our feelings, the way our bodies react. It's important for me to act nervous and scared and uncertain enough that he thinks it is the first time I've ever tried alcohol because I've already deceived him so much, given so much of myself to another person, that I owe him this. I want to make him feel special.

I tip the cup and its contents toward me, take a healthy sip, exhale stinging sweetness, flit my tongue around in my mouth to scrape at the remnants of pulp. I watch a smile spread across his face through my squinted eyes as I breathe through the burn that lunges down my throat.

—

Kirk and I had talked about me drinking for months. He had talked about it excitedly—getting tripped up over his words and stuttering like he did when he told me about the music his band was making. I had talked about it in a hypothetical, far-off sort of way, not imagining that it would ever really happen.

“It's like this—“ he told me, “you'll start to feel a warmth in the middle of your body that spreads to your fingers and toes until you're warm all over. The first thing you'll really notice is how the world comes into focus. Everything will be so detailed you could study a blade of grass for ten minutes and be so fascinated by it.”

That hadn't sounded so bad to me. He'd been going to a lot of parties, drinking, and

experimenting with drugs in the time after we broke up. It scared me and I wanted to keep him protected, even if that meant joining him in the dark sort of space I'd imagined he'd retreated to since our break-up, so I agreed to this.

"I'm going to come back in the car if you don't do it now. It's freezing out here," Kirk said over his shoulder.

I knew it was my last chance to do it on my own terms, sort of. It was important for me to do this with no real witness. A private moment. I plugged my nose, swallowed from the water bottle without tasting, set it down, and lifted the jug to my lips with both hands. When I was done, there was a gritty feeling in my mouth, like everything had been coated with a sheet of sandpaper. I shivered as the stinging aftertaste waded over my taste buds. I couldn't believe I had actually done it.

I knocked on the window and waved him back in. He wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed my cheek. I pushed the bottles toward him, still cringing. He chugged from the first and barely chased it with punch. He passed it back to me and we began this dance: swigging from one, then the other, and passing both to the other person, arms straight out. I wasn't nervous once I had crossed this boundary and I drank more each time, staring straight into his eyes as I sipped the cheap vodka that made my own eyes water.

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My best friend sits on the couch beside me, eyes flitting around the room. Her feet are dug firmly into the coal-singed carpet—the satin ribbon of her wedged heels laced up to mid-calf. We have just come from our junior year homecoming dance.

"I think I want to go home," she says, staring ahead to the open door and then at the people beyond it.

“Okay. I can drive you,” I say.

“No. I don’t want to make you leave. Plus are you sure you’re okay? You’ve been drinking.”

“I’ve had one sip!” I laugh.

It shocks me to realize that I sound like the people we make fun of—our peers who spend every weekend scrambling to make plans about where to drink or how to secure alcohol. I feel like a traitor; the faint smell of alcohol on my breath.

We left homecoming early, drove to the cottagey neighborhood where Tyler’s best friend lived, where all the students from their high school gathered for the evening to pillage their parents’ liquor cabinets or beg older siblings to provide them with alcohol for the annual Oktoberfest party. Even though we had been so against drinking, a few months before, we began to grow curious. We did it quietly at first, barely wondering out loud while we were driving, glancing from the corner of our eye to gauge the other’s reaction, then more vocally. She began dating a boy who broke into cars in the golf course subdivision where she lived, including her dad’s red minivan, from which he stole a bag of change and his stereo weeks after her dad was laid off from his pharmaceutical job. The boy, who always had the smell of malt liquor and clove cigarettes on his breath, promised to get her something fruity to drink the next time he threw a party in the lean-to in the woods that he and his friends built for the purpose of drinking and smoking.

I imagined Sara and myself clinking plastic glasses together, shyly observing the way the sugary-sweet mixture unknotted our minds, the personas we had been winding together for years. It seemed important to me that both Sara and I made the decision not to drink and that we began to question that decision at the same time. I wanted to have someone I could share

something that seemed so monumental to me that was just as important to her.

After the rape, I struggled to connect with Sara because it was the first thing either of us went through that we hadn't experienced together. Even on the rare occasions when we got in trouble at school, it was because of something we did together, like when we nominated our junior high science teacher for the television show *What Not to Wear* and were discovered after another teacher found the application, complete with details of all the horrible outfits Mrs. Gilmore was known to wear, on one of the school computers. When she kissed a boy for the first time in eighth grade, I quickly did the same so we could talk about it. I couldn't find the words to explain to her how I felt about what happened with Kirk, and she hadn't had sex so it was difficult to grasp at the confusion of it all. When I began sneaking around to see Kirk again after my mother forbid us from seeing each other, my own feelings about the situation were so conflicted that I shut that aspect of my life off from her entirely. I hoped that us giving into the temptation of drinking together would help to bring us closer once again, but she denied the drink Tyler offered her despite the fact that she and I spent the half-hour drive out to the lake talking about what we were hoping to drink when we got there.

I stand up and grab my keys from the coffee table. Tyler joins us on the drive back to my town. Drinking for hours before we arrived, his body is already submerged in the sweet alcohol. He sits in the back seat of my two-door sports car, humming the songs on the radio and peering out at the sky from the open driver's window.

I take the turns in her subdivision carefully, like a child with a handheld toy, guiding the ball carefully through the maze until it reaches the hole. I want her to know that I am still responsible, that I haven't changed. We arrive at her driveway—identical to the others in the cul-de-sac save the oil spots my used car leaked one of the first nights I proudly drove it

there. She opens the door before I come to a full stop, muttering a quick ‘thanks’ before walking to the garage door.

Tyler climbs head first into the front seat, bumping my head with his knee. He continues his half-singing as I watch Sara at the door to her garage, pressing the pad of her thumb against the numbers. The buttons always stick and the keypad blinks a few times before the garage door glides open and she enters the house. I drive back in silence knowing that I have solidified the rift between my best friend and me. I’ve crossed a barrier and left her alone on the other side.

—

As I drank in the darkness of Kirk’s car, I felt the way the alcohol began to beat away at the barriers I had made in my mind, the way I presented myself one way to my family and my friends and my boyfriend, while fighting myself over my feelings for Kirk.

He fidgeted with his hands as I drank—something between a nervous twitch and a pantomime of the guitar notes he was always going over in his head.

He was right, in a way. As the alcohol began its path through my bloodstream I sensed it in my gut first. It was like a tiny fire, licking at the lining of my stomach, but in a gentle way. It warmed me like the space heater I would press my feet up to on winter nights at my father’s house, guarding myself from the drafts that blew through the large windows of the Victorian house. Instead of making things clearer, though, the alcohol enveloped me in haziness. I turned to face the window, looking for the grass he had told me I would want to study. I found one blade springing up from a crack in the concrete, but I couldn’t make out any details. I reached for Kirk. The ends of my fingers were starting to tingle and though he felt fuzzy, he was the only thing around me that was in focus. I could make out the pinprick birthmark beneath his right eye and the larger one on his left ring finger. The music he had put on was barely static in my ears.

As the alcohol continued to spread, I had to unroll the window closest to me—it was suddenly too hot in the space of the car. Kirk leaned toward me, his lips puckered like a fish coming up to the surface of a mucky pond. I turned away. The Hawaiian Punch had left a wide red circle around his mouth as if he'd been wearing clown makeup that hadn't yet washed off. I became frantic trying to keep myself from thinking about Sara or Tyler or anyone else from my other life. I didn't yet know that it was okay for me to be alone with my thoughts and emptiness while I was pretending to be full of love in the arms of one boy or another. Years later I will realize that in order for this arrangement with Kirk to work, it required that I separated the two hemispheres of my life entirely.

When I was with my friends or Tyler, I had to pretend Kirk did not exist, as if the legal action my mom tried to take after the rape had scared him away for good. While I was with Kirk, everything our universe needed was in the backseat of his car. Our world was a world of perpetual midnight, darkness, ducking around the illumination of the streetlights that threatened to reveal us; our world was one that couldn't work unless I removed all my own emotions from the situation because if I thought about the first week that I began dating Tyler, the way that after I agreed to be his girlfriend, he barely whispered “don't take me for granted” before we hung up the phone that night, or the way Sara had cried and held me when I told her that Kirk had made me have sex with him, I wouldn't have been able to keep doing what I did, to continue to love and hurt the people who love and hurt me, over and over.

I held my hands out, motioning for the bottles we had placed on the floor of the car. Kirk handed them to me and I drank more.

“I knew you would like it,” he said with a wide smile.

If there was one thing I had learned from dating Kirk, it was that he was always right. If I

was going to drink with him, I was going to like it, because he did. I smiled back.

Then we were naked. He seemed to remove my underwear and his boxers in one movement. I was wondering how he managed to do so, especially with the weight I felt in my limbs, when he bent me over so my knees dug into one of the seatbelts and my elbows rested against the window. We had sex in a rushed way; it was all for him, selfish and powerful, but this time I allowed it.

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When Tyler and I return to the lakeside neighborhood, the crowd around the bonfire has dwindled. I park near the dock in front of our friend's house. We climb the stairs at the back of the house, not daring to talk until we have entered the lively bedroom once again. He pours us each another cocktail, the bottle of alcohol now nearly empty. We drink for hours—whatever else we can find, me capitulating to the newfound feeling of fuzziness, before we tiptoe down the stairs, past the bedrooms of our friend's younger siblings, and into the basement with its cool concrete floors.

He laces his fingers in mine and kisses my forehead. I try to forget what has happened with Sara. Our bodies melt into one another's, grasping for meaning, love.

I stand up and make my way to the tiny trampoline next to the ping-pong table. I begin jumping. He's taken me out of my homecoming dress and I'm left in a black bra and neon-green boy shorts with music notes on them. He watches me, his eyes bloodshot and squinted, his body molding to the pleather couch. My hair, curled for the dance that night, switches left to right with each jump.

“When did everything get so complicated?” I ask.

I mean to sound wistful and smart, but the alcohol has demolished the thin barrier I use to



keep my emotions at bay. My throat catches on the last word and I'm embarrassed to discover that I'm fighting tears. I'm not expecting an answer, at least not one that will help me, because I'm really trying to figure out what to do with the two lives I'm living—the self I show him and the self I show Kirk. What I'm really asking him is why I can't just love him and forget about the boy who made me do things I wasn't ready to do, or if it's okay that I love them both.

“It's not so complicated, baby. Come here.”

He holds one arm out, his head resting against the back of the couch. I walk to him, curl into his arms like a cat, and close my eyes. Then we have sex, our bodies bumping against one another sloppily, our limbs resting against the arm of the couch where stuffing spills out from the sides. Though Tyler thinks he is the first person I have drunk with, he knows he is not the first person I had sex with, but we tell each other that he is the first one who counts.

I had surprised myself when I decided that I wanted to sleep with Tyler only a month after we had begun dating and less than six months after Kirk had forced me. I'd felt a physical comfort with Tyler that allowed me to share that part of myself with him, or maybe the fact that I already had sex with Kirk had broken down a barrier that Tyler barely had to push past.

Now in the basement of this lakeside house, I'm like a fawn, unsure on her four limbs, working to make sense of these new sensations, trying to convince myself again, just like the first time we had sex, that this is the story that counts.

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In the car when Kirk was finished having sex with me, he drove us to get fast food before I had to sneak back into my house. It was a short drive—just a few blocks away on the same road. I had relocated to the passenger seat and leaned it back, my head tilted so it nearly rested on my shoulder.

Kirk insisted that we go inside to order when we arrived at the restaurant. I acquiesced since it was the middle of the night and he was probably trying to give us a sense of normality, to create the façade that we were the couple who could go on dates and hold hands in public, not the type who met up in some deserted parking lot to have sex under the cool blanket of darkness. He laughed at the way I scanned the illuminated menu board a few times over—my characteristic indecision amplified by my drunkenness—and then again when I ordered and mixed up two of the words I said. I was not used to something else having control over my body and my mind and I was embarrassed. I gathered one of his hands into both of mine—something I had always done in the early days of our relationship—and clung to him on the walk back to his car.

We returned to our original parking spot and ate as if we were starving. That's another thing he had warned me of: the hunger that would come with drunkenness. But when I finished eating I still felt empty, save the embers of fire the alcohol ignited in my stomach. Kirk stepped out of the car to pee his name on a deserted building. I waited for him to finish and said goodbye before I climbed the concrete barrier and pushed my way through the brush that brought me to my street once again.

I think he liked the idea of corrupting me, or at least the idea of my mother seeing me corrupted. With all the streetlights lulled to sleep I had a clear view of the sky. The mass of stars stretched across it like a cast net. I wanted to lie beneath them, to stare up at the sky until the alcohol ran its course and the brilliant winking stars returned to the far-off balls of light I normally saw.

I paused at the willow tree near the end of my driveway, considered burying myself beneath its waterfall branches, considered what it would be like to not have one set of stories I

shared with the masses and one set I kept buried within, before I climbed the far side of the yard alone once more, to sleep. When I woke, the memory of this night would already be erased—a story stifled.

## BEFORE YOU GO

It's the summer after my freshman year of high school and the weekend my father was supposed to get married, but instead of arranging flowers and fastening neckties, we're in a caravan of cars on the way to my childhood vacation house near Galena, Illinois: a house I haven't been to in years. Rolling hills surround the car in every direction—evidence that the glaciers' trudge across what would become the Midwest did not disturb the landscape of the Mississippi River Valley—and as we climb and descend each slope, growing closer to the cottage that was once my weekly getaway, a knot in my stomach tightens.

If I wasn't so unsure of what awaits us at the house, I would convince myself that the feeling in my stomach is the same fluttering excitement that I used to feel when my father would navigate these hills with my brother and me in the back seat: unfastened seatbelts and bags of sugary candy between us. While on vacation as children, we begged him to take us to one particular hill—the tickle hill—in between Schapville, the one-road town where our house was located, and the tourist town of Galena. He drove us there at least once each trip, picking up speed as we cleared the top of the hill so the car would lift off the ground and send our insides somersaulting against our ribcages. That feeling of weightlessness characterized the time spent here during my childhood: an instinctive reaction to a fleeting feeling that sent me into fits of giggles and kept a smile on my face for the rest of the day.

Now we have been in the car for at least half an hour, and we certainly have not jumped the tickle hill. My uncle is driving us in the car he rented when my family arrived earlier in the week so I know that even if we come across that hill or another suitable for those euphoric stomach plunges that I remember from my childhood, he will be unwilling to drive fast enough so that everyone in the car can feel exactly what it is I love about this place.

My father drives ahead of us in his Trooper, leading the way through a series of back roads that he has memorized from years of vacationing here. When my dad's high school sweetheart called off their August wedding, my uncle decided to turn the week of the wedding into a family reunion. My father agreed on the condition that we all tour his house in Schapville before the end of the trip. Only his brother and nephew had visited the cottage before: his brother during an extended business trip a decade earlier, and his nephew on a post-college road trip from Duke University to his hometown of San Diego. I remember how both were unsettled by the quiet of the countryside during their visits, and I am sure that has something to do with them putting this excursion off until the end of the week. At fifteen years old, I too am uneasy at the thought of returning to the house that was a facet of my childhood, but for reasons other than an aversion to the countryside.

My father purchased the farmhouse after spending years in the area during his extended young bachelorhood. Once he was in his forties and married with two young kids, he saw the house's potential to become a vacation home. We began restoration on the house much as he had done himself with our home on Sheridan Road before my brother and I were born. We spent many weekends of my childhood in Schapville returning the house to its original layout.

We stripped paint, tore down the attached, decrepit garage, planted flowers, and shopped for period-appropriate pieces at the antique store in town where we made friends with the one-armed shop owner named Buzz. On nights before the upstairs was remodeled we slept in sleeping bags on the hardwood floor where pieces of plaster fell from the ceiling like heaps of snow that had collected in a branch for too long. We worked tirelessly until we had the perfect countryside getaway, and then we enjoyed it as a family until my parents separated when I was eight. After the divorce, our visits to Schapville became less frequent, as each vacation required

negotiation between my disagreeing parents. They eventually stopped altogether when my brother and I ended overnight visits with our dad.

Our week in Galena had been a unique mix of family interests: browsing the main street of town for antiques during the day to appease my father's passion for restoration and history and then dining experiences that lasted hours each night for his family who preferred elegant five course meals, cruises, and golf outings. Normally one to enjoy the adventures of antiquing with my father, I had become too preoccupied with the role that alcohol played in the meals we shared with his family to enjoy our time that week.

My father would never admit that he was an alcoholic. My brother, mom, and I had been exposed to the disease firsthand for many years: drunken fumbling in the middle of the night, accidents that he always had an explanation for in the morning, the way he would forget details of the night before. Because his family lived so far away and alcohol had always been a centerpiece of their own lives, they had never seen the signs of addiction that I had learned to recognize from a young age.

Our infrequent visits with his family revolved around alcohol, something I was perhaps hyperaware of. Vacations to my grandparents' house in North Carolina consisted of wine and cheese pairings every night before dinner, and their bringing a bottle from their extensive collection amassed from years of travelling to dinner with us and insisting that the waiter serve it to them.

This trip was much the same. Each night, there was a cocktail hour at my family's sprawling rented home at one of Galena's golf resorts that led up to our departure for the meal. Dinner was then paired with a few bottles of wine, thoughtfully selected by my grandfather.

“I’m all right with water. It’s just so hot out,” my father said the night before our drive to Schapville, tugging at the stiff collar of his shirt rather than taking the glass of red wine his brother had extended to him to toast our last formal dinner together.

He had uttered similar lies the preceding nights without suspicion, but each time alcohol was offered to my dad, I froze. My back stiffened and my ears grew heavy with the thudding of my heart as I was sure each offer would be the one when his family would finally realize that drinking had taken over his life. Yet, they were unaware, and each toast continued without confrontation. They didn’t notice the way his hands trembled when he hadn’t had a drink in a few hours, or how he would sneak off to the car to take a pull from whatever bottle he was hiding in the trunk. They didn’t seem to see the way his eyes glazed over after his unexplained trips to the car, or how over the years of drinking had reddened the skin of his face.

I observed all of this with a trained eye, sharpened from years of tracking deception, but it still amazed me that his family hadn’t noticed the charade he had been playing for them all week: a charade that my brother and I had been roped into as well.

When I was thirteen and my brother ten, we ended overnight visits with our dad. We had grown tired of the years of secret drinking, which he had become more careless in concealing. Though we wouldn’t be ready to verbally confront his drinking for years, the request to end these visits was our first acknowledgement that there was a problem in his home.

In the two years since we had ended of our biweekly visits, I knew his drinking had only grown more serious. When plans for the family reunion were finalized near the end of my freshman year, my father asked my mom’s permission to take us to the reunion in Galena and for us to stay at the house in Schapville with him.

After consulting her lawyer, she learned that if we stayed overnight with him we would nullify the custody arrangement that freed us from sleepovers at his house. Horrified at the idea of my brother and me spending the remaining years until we turned eighteen at my father's house but not wanting us to miss the opportunity to see his family, my mom and I proposed that she accompany us on the vacation.

My father fought her until the day we left for the trip, and it wasn't until we were in Galena that I realized how ashamed he was of this arrangement. My mother had rented a room in one of the hotels on a bluff overlooking the town and decided to remain poolside while we spent time each day with our dad's family. The first night in town before dinner with his family, my dad arrived early to pick us up and paced the parking lot of the hotel until we were ready. No mention was made of my mom's presence in town and he spent the week shuttling us to and from the hotel, pretending to his family that my brother and I had been with him the whole time.

This morning my dad suggested breakfast at his family's rented home before we all made the trek to Schapville together. It was another well-orchestrated excuse that allowed him to rise early and pick my brother and me up from Galena rather than having his family meet us at the house in Schapville where they thought we had been staying with him all week. His plan worked: our trickery was seamless. We had left with him when we said goodnight to his family the previous evening, and we appeared together for breakfast that morning.

Just as my father was unwilling to acknowledge that my mom was in town, he also refused to discuss the deception we enacted on his family and we hadn't concocted a plan of action for the most elaborate illusion yet. He offered no advice on how my brother and I were to act as we toured along with his family the vacation house we hadn't been to in years.



I am sitting on the sticky leather of the back seat beside my brother who has our cousin Owen in his lap and is eagerly pointing out everything we pass: trees, squirrels, cows, hills, silos.

“Beauuuu-ful,” my brother used to say when I would pull him to my side of the car when we were children to point at the sights outside my window.

“That’s ugly,” Owen says about everything my brother directs his attention to.

The other passengers laugh each time Owen declares the sights we pass as unsightly, but I keep my gaze on the car in front of us that bumps along the gravel roads, kicking up dust and pebbles into our view through the windshield.

The masses of trees surrounding us thin and the road flattens a bit. We are at a stop sign and to the left, atop a knoll, sit rows of crumbling tombstones. They are slate gray, but their sizes differ tremendously. Some are barely markers of the graves beneath them, just small, rectangular slabs of stone placed on top of the plot. Others are ornate tombs with statues guarding the entrances to honor the dead.

*Eversoll, Dittmar, Schap, Meinberg, Redember, Stadel.* I memorized many of the names on the headstones in the summer twilight during years in which I was fascinated with the nineteenth century, ghosts, and the spirits of those who had lived before me. We kids in the neighborhood would meet up in the cemetery after dinner, some with flashlights, in order to play whatever games we could come up with that night. It was usually ghosts in the graveyard or kick-the-can or freeze tag, and I often found myself wandering the rows of tombstones illuminated by the unobstructed moonlight, constructing past lives for the names I found on the markers. Only when the ground was soft from summer rain was I afraid of the bodies that lie beneath me. I imagined my own feet sinking into the mud until they made contact with a

wooden casket. When I had these thoughts, I would run across the street to my own home base: the swing on my front porch that was just across the road and two stone driveways away.

The cemetery is actually behind the Schapville Zion Presbyterian Church, which I can see now that we have rolled forward at the stop sign. It is a large white building, and I imagine it looks almost identical to the way it was when first built in 1886. The ramp that leads to the kitchen entrance on the side of the building is where I suffered my first and only concussion when I let my brother pull me down the wooden path on roller skates.

We turn right and the enormous pine tree in our front yard is visible. My dad once told me that it was the biggest pine tree in town, and that the mayor had offered five hundred dollars to buy it from him. I was worried that the mayor simply wanted to chop the tree down because of the way that it stretched from our front porch to the gravel along the side of the road. I had forbid my father from selling it to him because I couldn't bear the thought of my favorite place in the whole world no longer belonging to me. Now I'm not even sure there is a mayor of Schapville, and it doesn't make sense that he would spend his time buying trees off properties, but I am glad the tree still stands in the center of this front yard: a distinguished marker blocking the porch from sight.

When I was younger, I would push through the branches of the pine until I reached the clearing inside the tree where I would stand atop a bed of dry needles. I dreamt of putting a couch and table in there and having sleepovers with my best friend who lived next door, but the closest we ever got were a few logs that we would sit on while sharing a package of Oreos. Mostly, we spent time climbing the sturdy branches as close to the top as we could manage, and peering out onto the rolling meadows around us.

We pull into the makeshift driveway next to the garden and everyone gets out of the car and stretches before we climb the rock pathway leading up to the house.

“Wow, you guys are really roughing it out here, huh Randy?” my uncle asks while slamming the door to his car, “Unmarked driveways and everything.”

My dad continues toward the front door.

I reach out to touch the ancient pine as I near the house. I want to peer through the bare patch of branches on the other side of the tree that we had used as our entrance, but I can't risk it with an audience. Instead I wait on the porch. Owen dives onto the porch swing with rusty chains and chipping green paint and my brother follows him, scooping him into his arms until my dad unlocks the door and grants us entrance to the house.

It looks the same as the last time I visited, except that there is more furniture and dust. Kitschy crocheted sayings are framed throughout the kitchen, and I am almost positive the box of cereal on top of the fridge is the same box from the last time I stayed here. The tile in the downstairs bathroom is caked with dead ladybugs. We used to have to sweep the floor in there several times each day as the bugs would drop from thick windowpanes faster than we could clean them. It seems he has given up and allowed the bugs to claim the room in our absence.

Sunlight streams into the living room from the large window that faces the street. In this room is the pull out couch that I slept on many summer nights when it was too hot to climb to the second floor of the house. The sheets on the convertible mattress smelled of ladybugs and musk, and I wonder if they still do as I see a square of linen peeking out from beneath one of the green corduroy cushions. I sit on the couch while my family files into the room.

“Wow, nice TV,” my uncle says.

He pounds his fist on the boxy TV that sits atop an antique chest in the living room. Its antennas point to different corners of the room, extended to unequal heights. In the chest are only two movies: *Field of Dreams* and an instructional video on pitching.

“Yeah, well the kids and I don’t like distractions while we’re out here. We prefer to spend time with each other. Right guys?” my dad explains, putting an arm around each of us on the couch.

Neither of us answers. I force a smile and make my way upstairs.

“How did you guys sleep in that quiet country house? Isn’t it creepy?” my uncle asked every morning when meeting up with them for the day.

“All right,” my brother and I would reply before turning our attention to our phones or a game of catch with Owen.

I stop at the landing halfway to the second floor. A small octagonal window provides a view of the house across from ours. It is a mirror image of our house as they were built by an architect who wanted a place for his family and his brother’s family to live. Each morning I would peer out that window for some sign that my friend who lived in the other house was awake and ready to begin the adventures of that day. When I look out the window now, there is no sign of life outside. I make my way upstairs, pausing to allow my dad to pass in front of me.

“Here’s Masher’s room,” he declares and turns the doorknob to my room.

That had been his childhood nickname for me, and I guess since we are pretending that things are still as they were when I was a child, it is suiting for the occasion. I enter my room—the brightest of the three upstairs—and sit down on the floral comforter on my bed. The mattress is the same thin one that I had slept on as a girl, and itchy lace pillows decorate the top of the bed near the headboard. The windows lead out to an overhang on the roof, where my

friend and I would often climb to scare anyone who walked onto the porch underneath us. On the wall is a framed poster of a ballerina with a particularly inspirational message that I had memorized at age eight and recited to myself in order to complete my first successful pull-over in gymnastics. In the closet is a foam mattress pad and a set of wicker chairs.

“I have to say I expected Ashley to have a lot more clothes than this,” my uncle says, and I realize that there is no luggage in sight.

“Well, she keeps a lot of clothes here. We come here so often that I bought her a whole wardrobe so she didn’t have to worry about packing. I bought her this dresser at a garage sale, too,” my dad explains and swipes his hand across the maple dresser in my room. I notice one of the drawers is propped open, and it is obvious that there is nothing inside of it. I reach over and close it before we continue to the next room.

My brother’s bedroom wasn’t a room in the house that was ever used. Even when we visited regularly, he slept on the pullout couch downstairs as the mattress in his room was stiff and threadbare. The only time we went in his room was if we needed to spy on some of the neighborhood boys from his window, which provided a view of the backyard, or if we were playing cops and robbers because his closet had a metal bench attached to the wall.

We crowd ourselves into the room, which is furnished with the antique twin bed, a deflated swim raft, and a plastic kite, as well as a few baseball pennants taped to the wall.

“This is ugly,” Owen says, looking around the room. His mom clasps a hand over his mouth and pulls him close to her.

My brother is only twelve years old, but he is already well over six feet tall. There is no conceivable way he would fit into this bed, and there are no clothes in his room, either. I am

sure that my uncle will make another comment, as he is always the one to make bold remarks, but it is my grandpa who speaks this time.

“That must be some sort of fit to squeeze you into that bed each night, Conner,” he says.

My grandpa is over eighty years old, and his eyesight is quickly deteriorating, but even he sees the impracticality of all of this.

The familiar feeling of humiliation floods over me much as it did when I was younger and tried to hide my dad’s drinking from friends who I had sleep over on nights that I had to stay with him.

My brother chuckles, keeping his mouth closed in a constricted smile, and looks over at me, hands in his pockets.

I am old enough that I have begun to realize the problems my father has created for my brother and me, but my brother is younger and still bound to him by a forged father-son relationship, victim to the belief that a father can do no wrong. I want to take him away from here, tell him that no one should have to lie for their parents, but I am lying too, so we share a pained, silent look.

The room is hot—hot enough to suggest that the door has not been opened in a very long time, and that certainly no one has been sleeping in here during this trip.

In the heat, I wait for someone to confront my dad, to chastise us for this poorly choreographed charade, for the mimicry of family life that we have tried to enact. As a silence as still as the heat in the room falls over us, I realize no one is going to, which might be more embarrassing than if they had because I won’t have the chance to explain myself.

Years later when we are preparing to send my dad off for the first of many failed rehab programs, I will learn that my uncle knew we weren’t staying with him during that week, but that

he had not known why. I will have my opportunity for explanation, but it will no longer be necessary because my dad will have revealed his own problems in the way drinking consumes his life.

But for now, I have no idea how much or little they know, and I am angry with my father.

I am angry for the way he yelled at me earlier in the week when I told him that we would be staying in a hotel instead of with him, for the outrage he displayed toward me for problems he had created all on his own. I am angry with him for making us all come back here, for not preparing for this visit, for making us lie for him, and for all the reasons that we can't just be in this house like a real family.

I feel my face flush red as we make our way down the stairs and out to the driveway once again. I look over at the dilapidated garden, once the most majestic part of this life in the country, and wish I could feel the enchantment that used to be tangible in this place.

It's early August and I am seven. For now I have a few more hours of rich dusk before the sun disappears behind the steeple point in the churchyard across the street, before the bats stir from darkness in the rafters behind the illuminated cross. For now my parents are still married and my best friend lives ten barefoot steps across a gravel driveway from my front door.

We have spent the day trading candy grapefruit slices for worn down Beanie Babies and reasons why we want to meet Hanson more than the Spice Girls. We have worn white nylon tutus with ribbons of satin along the bottom and purple leotards that made us itchy as we jumped on the sagging trampoline outside her garage. We have climbed the trees in the front and back of my house and invented new worlds, looking out onto the views we thought were there just for us.

When the dark settles over our little town, too far from Galena for headlights or streetlamps to be visible at night, we'll probably walk across the street and into the church

cemetery where we'll invent games until my mom tells us it's time for bed. But for now, I'm in the garden standing next to the tree my dad has just planted. He is on the patio after taking a quick shower to wash off the sweat from a day of digging and spreading mulch, and the few patches of silvery hair look almost brown as they stick to his head. He's grilling—vegetables grown from the plot a few yards away that he fenced off to keep rabbits out—and he's listening to "A Prairie Home Companion." I recognize the radio program from the host's low ramblings that sound full of age and wisdom. He has placed the radio in the living room window with the open glass holding it in place so the theatrical voices of the show spill out across the patio over the sounds of coals crackling and Junebugs chirping. He sits down on the patio furniture, takes a sip of iced tea, and smiles. He is the king of this patio. Of the world he has carefully foraged here for us, piece by piece. Wildflowers of deep fuchsia, purple, and yellow surround him, growing taller in the summer sun than the patio walls that he built with carefully calculated rows of brick. I walk over to the edge of the garden, sink my feet into the fresh mulch, and pluck an indigo flower to place behind my ear. I peek through the high grass at my dad who smiles back at me with sparkling eyes that are almost transparent in the flare of the sun.

Now the veil of ignorance that was once draped carefully before me has been pulled away like a pair of sunglasses removed too quickly in the blinding sun, and instead of beauty, I see loss. I see the man who built this world around me crumbling with it. He stands on the patio, overgrown with dandelions and thistles and rusted patio furniture, looking away from us all. He bends down to pick a weed from between the cracked red brick, but his efforts are futile. Vines have made their way up the chipped yellow side of the house, growing into the cracks of the windows. Weeds have consumed the wildflower garden, and the vegetable plot's fence has been trampled by rabbits and coyotes. The grass grazes our calves because my dad has stopped



paying the neighbor to cut it each week. He spends another minute facing the pasture that backs up into our backyard, and I hope that maybe he's pretending he lives the life he imagined is beyond that field, the life that he thought he was buying us with this \$27,000 cottage years ago. I think maybe he's embarrassed for bringing us back here, and for lying to his family, and maybe even for everything he's ever done that has brought us all to this point. But then he turns around and walks back to where we wait.

“Man, isn't this place just great?” he asks, shaking his head and smiling.

My brother and I separate from the group and our dad drives us back to the hotel without mention of the lies he has just told or the disarray of my childhood home. With each hill that we climb closer to town, I'm not sure that I can stop myself from giving up on someone who gave us that life and then just watched as it all fell away.

The next day we drive to a ski resort named Chestnut Mountain on one of the ridges surrounding Galena. I have never actually been there, but it is one of the places my dad has advertised to his family as a spot that we frequently go to spend time together. I discover that in the off-season, Chestnut Mountain has a track carved into one of the hillsides for sledding. Big red sleds coast down shallow troughs of glossy cement until they collide with barriers of padding that end the tracks in the valley below. We take turns going down the twin tracks in pairs except for my dad, who opts to go down alone. He holds the reins at the front of the sled underneath his legs, which are pulled toward his chest like a deer that has just been captured and bound to be thrown in the bed of a pickup truck. His legs touch at the knees and then jut out to opposite sides of the sled. They tremble until he releases his grip at the end of the course.

We make fun of him each time we slide down the track, looking over and laughing as we run parallel to one another, before the paths diverge for a series of dips and curves to meet up

again at the end of the track. He can't understand why we're laughing, although we spend each break between runs demonstrating the proper posture for maneuvering the sled, and he continues to ride his own way until we leave that afternoon. Maybe he doesn't comprehend what we try to tell him, or maybe he can't see things from anyone's point of view but his own. He has spent so long making himself out to be better than everyone else, the type of person everyone wants to be, that he can't see how ridiculous he looks. And he can't ask for help untying the ropes that have been winding themselves around him for years now, that will continue to bind him until escape is impossible, because he is too proud and too sick to see a way out.

My brother and I bring our mom back to Chestnut Mountain later that day when we are sure that my dad's family members are en route to opposite coasts of the country, and that my dad has retreated to his house in the countryside. The sun is just beginning to set, and we pay to get a few rides in before the track closes for the night. We alternate turns with our mom, and soon it is time to make the three-hour drive back home. We plead for one more trip down the hill, and I climb into the front of the sled where my mom has positioned herself in the back.

Although it's almost nighttime, the August air is hot and still up here in the mountains, and my legs stick to the plastic of the seat. I grab the reins, resting my hands on my thighs, and my mom uses her hands to grip the guardrails and push us off. As we start the slow falling into the first dip, we pick up enough speed that a breeze blows past, sending the sweet smell of pinesap and freshly cut grass over me as we continue our descent. I'm laughing and my hair is whipping around, sticking to my teeth. I look out at the mountains that surround us—stratified layers of pink, purple, and orange provide a background to the rolling slopes in the impending dusk. I look back at my mom. She is almost identical to me, her hair blowing in the wind just like mine. Only the worry lines across her temples and mouth differentiate us in the dim glow of

dusk. She was young when she married my father, young when she realized he was an alcoholic, and young when she began raising my brother and me on her own, but that didn't stop her from working to keep us safe from harm and guilt. She found the strength to move us out of our dad's house when we were kids and to fight for a divorce that took years to finalize so that my brother and I could have the chance to experience real, untainted beauty.

I'm not sure when I'll be back to see the mountains again, or if I'll ever have a view as beautiful as the one I have right now, but I memorize the way the hills fold into one another, creating an impermeable barrier from the rest of the world that keeps this valley safe for us. The weightless feeling experienced during years of driving over the hills of northwestern Illinois returns, and I can't help but smile all the way down. In those last few minutes before nightfall, before we get in the car to drive home, it is almost as if my mom has recreated the wonders of this rolling stretch of farmland that I thought only my father was capable of constructing for us.

## LEARNING TO GRIEVE, TO HURT, TO HIDE

When you were sixteen you fell in love for the first time in the dark basement of your best friend's house. Your friends and you had started a music booking company and were having a concert at her house to raise money. High school boys in beanies and spiked black belts swarmed the tiny basement space, tracking mud onto the laminate you had put down to save the carpet, kicking holes in the wall as they thrashed about in the crowd, and climbing in and out of the basement window to smoke cigarettes in the backyard.

Tyler sent his friend over to talk to you while you collected admission money at a folding table. His friend and you watched as Tyler and his girlfriend fought—she stood against the wall and pushed him away from her in the same way the boys behind them pushed each other about in the crowd; she with none of the playful expressions the boys wore as they forced the weight of their bodies into one another. You didn't know she was his girlfriend at the time; his friend had done a good job covering up that fact for him. He approached you as soon as she was crossing the basement to go out for a cigarette. You started dating him two weeks later. You didn't think he was very cute, already balding at seventeen when you only dated boys with shaggy, side swept hair, but loving someone had a way of making that not matter.

You fell in love in a way that only teenagers can—forsaking jobs, schoolwork, friends. Tyler taught you to drive on the straight roads hidden by rows of corn near his house: a different world from the suburban expanse of strip malls and amusement park traffic in your hometown. He shut off the car one day as you slowed at a stop sign, declaring that you should have learned how to deal with these sorts of emergencies in your Driver's Ed classes, and watched as you frantically figured out how to restart the car. He drove your friends and you up and down the

north shore of Illinois, to another church basement, school gym, VFW, where you began organizing concerts.

You snuck him into your bedroom at the back of your one-story house when you were sure your mother was asleep. You lay in bed until sunrise, never sleeping, listening to a playlist of songs by bands you had fallen in love with as you fell in love with him: Brand New, Lydia, All Time Low, The Dangerous Summer, Dashboard Confessional. Sometimes you snuck out of your window in the same way to see him—rolling the car down the slope of your long driveway in neutral. It was the sort of overwhelming love that, for as far as you could project into the future, you couldn't imagine your life without. But you were both young and immature and unsure of that all-consuming commitment. As many people do when they are young, you changed. You changed your minds, complicated things, until it was difficult to remember what the beginning of your relationship was like or how to get back to that point.

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On the morning my grandma dies I'm sitting at the computer in my mom's bedroom, legs crossed against the wooden wicker of an antique chair. The phone rings.

"She's gone, honey," my mom says.

We knew this day was coming—my grandma could only fight last-stage lung cancer, the same disease that killed her husband four years earlier, for so long. When she was diagnosed that May, we knew that the cancer was going to win out quickly. The next couple months were a haze of unending hospital stays and doctor visits, sneaking jalapeno cornbread and Wendy's chili into the hospital rooms: each room indistinguishable from the last aside from the ever-crumbling form of my grandma's body.

I want to cry. I want to let my mom know that I can hurt in the same way that I know she does, but the problem is that I don't know how to grieve without my grandmother. She was always the one there for me during times when I was sad. When we moved out of my dad's house. When we lived in the basement of her house where we—my brother, mom, and I—shared a queen-sized bed. My grandma distracted me from the conflict of my parents' divorce by teaching me to ride a bike and making me bagels with cream cheese and extra crispy bacon. When my grandpa's mom died, my grandma sat with my brother and me in the parlor upstairs at the funeral home even though she had been divorced from my grandpa for decades. When I began dating Tyler, who broke up with me every few weeks, I would go to her house and tell her about the most recent fight as we sat at the breakfast bar: a bowl and cashews and Reese's between us.

One year when my brother and I were sleeping at her house on the eve of Saint Nicholas Day she asked me to pretend to fall asleep and then come get her so we could fill my brother's shoes with gifts for the holiday that he would find the next morning. When I got out of bed, excited to conspire with her, and walked to the dining room, she was sitting at the lacquered wood table and smoking a cigarette that she quickly stamped out as I entered the room. Its embers glowed from the crystal ashtray. I stared at them, willing them to go out with my gaze; the hold of addiction was something I couldn't grasp even though I had been exposed to much of it in my childhood. I couldn't help but be angry with her for returning to smoking after losing her husband to lung cancer.

Before he died she hadn't smoked in years, but I remembered the habit from my childhood—how irritable she had been on a family vacation in Daytona Beach days after she had tried to quit.

I visited her at her house the week before she died. She was in the hospice bed set up on the cool marble floors of her living room. An oxygen machine noisily assisted her own hushed breaths.

“You’re so pretty! Come over here and take a picture with me. Us two pretty girls,” she said.

My mom took the picture on my cellphone without a flash. When I opened my phone to look at the picture later, my grandma looked like a ghost. Her short hair that had once been a vibrant auburn clung to her forehead: everything a shade of gray against the cavernous background of the entrance to the next room.

I want to hurt for her, to cry and scream and plead, but I can’t just yet.

Before I do anything else, I call Tyler. We’ve been broken up for a few weeks, which is how it has gone for the last year: one month together, an argument, his refusal to talk to me for days at a time, and a mutual (though not really mutual at all) agreement to take some time apart. This time we both knew that my grandma didn’t have much longer to live and so before the delegated break-up he told me that he would be there for me as soon as it happened.

True to his word, he answers and tells me that he’ll be right over.

While I wait, I fall asleep sideways on my mother’s bed.

During our first month of dating, Tyler and I were driving in the dark of his friend’s lakeside neighborhood. As we molded the car to the road that curved with the lake I told him about a friend of mine who I had stopped talking to because of the on-and-off relationship she had with the boy she was dating and how she began to put him before anyone or anything else in her life.

“I would never do the on-and-off dating,” I said, “because once you break up that first time, things will never be the same.”

“But isn’t that the whole point? Obviously the way things were before wasn’t working for them, so why not try again?”

This debate was a moment I returned to often, surprising myself with how many times and with what conviction I argued his point back to him. The way I said or did anything he wanted to try to restart or revive our relationship.

I wake three hours later to the sound of someone knocking on the window next to my front door. Tyler’s freckled face looks in and I open the door. We don’t talk about my grandma. He doesn’t tell me that he is sorry for my loss, which I tell myself I like because I never understood why people apologize for someone dying. Instead he tells me how his mom made him run a bunch of errands and that is why he is late. I pretend it doesn’t bother me because he always tells me I’m too dramatic, making a fuss over the smallest things, and I think he’s right. If I just appreciate him and don’t get upset all the time, he tells me, everything will be fine.

I’m not sure whose fault it was that we first broke up because we didn’t break up, not really. We just stopped talking one day and then that day became a month and we weren’t sure how to talk anymore. He called me that Valentine’s Day as I was leaving my job at a grocery store and we asked each other how our lives were, not knowing how we fit into one another’s. I think we wanted to ask what had happened to us, but strangers don’t ask each other those sorts of questions, and that was what he had become in the expanse of time that was actually just a month in high school. When we got off the phone I walked back into the store to buy what was left of the holiday merchandise: a couple bags of candy and a stuffed dog with a pink heart in his mouth. I’m not sure if I ever gave these to him.



The next I heard, he was taking another girl to prom. Maybe it was simply that I didn't want anyone else to have him, or maybe I realized that I really did love him, but I was suddenly in love in a desperate sort of way.

I tried to talk to him all the time. I bought him anything he wanted, did his homework, wrote him songs that I would never have the courage to sing. One day after school I made the half-hour drive to his neighborhood with a gift basket for him—a two hundred dollar microphone to record music—in the passenger seat. When I got there I saw a girl with thick blonde hair opening the door of her car outside his house. She could have been anyone, but I was sure she was the girl he had been talking to. Rather than stop, I pressed my foot on the accelerator as hard I could, taking the turns of the roads sharply. I sped past his house twice, wondering what would happen if I were to hit her. He asked me later that day if I had been by his house so I guessed it was her in the white car I had seen. It made me wish I could drive over there and do it again.

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When you're seventeen, grieving is sex on your mother's bed atop the comforter, the coarseness of the fabric leaving an imprint on the small of your back where your shirt has been pulled up but not deemed important enough to be taken off. The only things you can think about are how scratchy the material feels and how it must be covered in dog hair because you smell the damp mustiness of dog each time you turn your head. Usually you try to keep him interested with sex, which has resulted in having sex in the woods, the trampoline in your backyard, the tight backseat of your car. The passion you usually display for his benefit—so hopelessly young, lithe, there to please him—notably absent. As soon as he is finished he tells you that he has to leave.

“Can I see you later?” you ask.

He will let you know. He may be at his friend's house—a house he tells you that you are no longer welcome at since you and him got into a fight on the back steps until he pushed you and you stumbled down the first half of the balcony stairs, your crying loud enough to wake his friend's family—but if he is not there, he will see you. You now know the real reason he came to see you and you wish you hadn't had sex with him but then he would have gotten mad and left even sooner. You don't know what other choice you had.

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Mom comes home from work and we go to my grandma's house. We wait for the hospice company to pick up the hospital bed and equipment: the last signs that there was a dying person in this house. We begin to make arrangements and sort through some of her belongings. I wait to hear if Tyler will see me again that night. I lose patience and call him from the kitchen of my grandma's house while my mom and aunt look through shoeboxes of pictures in the hall closet.

“Oh. I forgot to tell you. Sorry, hun. We went to Jake's so I'll see you some other time,” he says.

I want to tell him that he needs to spend time with me because my grandma just died and he promised he would be there for me and I don't want to be alone, but I know how he hates when I get upset. I say nothing.

When my mom and I leave my grandma's house, we stop at the gas station. I get out of the car and walk to where the entrance meets the busy street while she is inside paying. The smell of gasoline burns more than usual since my nose has become runny from the tears I have suppressed that day. I send a message to the friend whose house I'm not allowed at, apologizing

for the problems I caused the last time I was there, and explaining that my grandmother has died and that I really needed to be around friends right now.

He answers quickly while I am still standing by the road, telling me how sorry he is. He says he never told anyone that I wasn't allowed at his house, and that I'm more than welcome to go there, but that he's the only one there and he hadn't invited anyone over that night. I don't hear from Tyler the rest of the night.

The next morning I'm in my mom's room on the computer again when I come across pictures that one of Tyler's friends posted from the night before. In the pictures, they're at a bowling alley. Tyler is red-faced from summer sun and alcohol, bleary-eyed with drunkenness. He is smiling in each frame, surrounded by friends. In the last picture of the album he holds a burning cigarette. The smoke rises from between his fingers, casting a fog over the face of the girl next to him in the photo as the cigarette sits in the space between their shoulders. He has never told me that he smokes, though I've smelled it on his breath plenty of times.

"It's just my clothes from being around my mom and brother who smoke all the time," he always said.

I send him the details for the wake and the funeral as I learn them; my messages receive no reply. I stand with my family near the casket at the wake, expecting to see him walk through the doors of the funeral parlor and join me at the front of the room. The next morning at the funeral, my father appears. He takes a seat in the last row and does not speak to anyone—he is only there to show his support my brother and me. But when the deacon finishes the sermon and announces the procession toward the casket, he asks the people in the last row of pews to begin. My father is the first person to approach my grandma's casket that day: fifteen rows of eyes watching him. I imagine Tyler sneaking in, joining the end of the line, and making his way past

flower arrangements until he is standing where my father is. Instead I watch as the rows of people file past, some of them stopping at our seats to hug us and cry as they had the night before.

We host a luncheon at the restaurant and bar that my grandma owned. Once all the leftovers are wrapped and loaded into our van we drive home. I fall asleep in the black dress and tights I wore to the ceremony.

Years later, Tyler's step-grandfather will die from pancreatic cancer. Tyler will only have known the man for five years, since he is the father of the woman his father marries when Tyler is in high school, but he will call me to tell me how sad he is.

"It's taken me too long, but now I realize how heartless I was when your grandma died. I didn't understand how bad it could hurt until now since I have to go through the same thing. I shouldn't have done what I did to you. I didn't know how to grieve and it was so wrong, but I'm sorry," he will say.

By then, we will no longer be dating. I will want to tell him that he doesn't understand, that he could never know the uncertainty of the loss I felt back then at seventeen, but instead I will tell him that it was a long time ago so it's okay. I will feel his familiar hold over my emotions, the way my moods toggled between so happy and so miserable based on how he treated me. I will have the feeling that, if I were to tell him how much I really hurt back then, he will turn the situation around on me and make me feel the way he used to when I was too emotional. I will work to suppress my anger toward him; I will remember the delicacy of my young emotions and the way he controlled them, crushed them. I will swear to never give someone that same power over me and to never let him know how deeply it affected me, though I already know I will break at least one of those promises.

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Tyler calls after your grandma's funeral and wakes you from a sleep so deep that you'd be complacent to stay there forever. You answer in a daze, unsure if you are actually talking to him or dreaming it.

He asks how you have been, not mentioning the services. When you begin telling him about the funeral, he cuts you off.

"I wanted to go. I really did, but I couldn't. You don't understand how sad I would have been. I didn't want to cry," he says.

You want to tell him that it doesn't matter how sad he would have been because he didn't deserve that sadness, you did, and he owed it to you to be there. You don't. You never do.

## A TIME TO PRETEND

I stood in the driveway of my aunt and uncle's Poway ranch, watching the empty, sunbaked streets in anticipation of something I was not quite sure of. It was my last full day in California—the end of a week spent getting to know my dad's family. I had carefully saved the outfit I was wearing for that day, a red paisley print sundress that reminded me of a pair of elaborately beaded moccasins, for what I had warned my family at the beginning of the week would be devoted to spending time with future DePaul University students like myself.

I had provided Evan with the address to my relatives' house the night before: stolen glimpses at the street sign on the corner and the numbers posted next to the garage door as we were finalizing our plans to meet. I had told my family that I would be meeting up with people who would be attending DePaul that fall, but I had neglected to tell them that it was a single boy who would be picking me up from their home. I imagined my aunt and uncle trading looks of skepticism: a shared glance they had probably mastered during their forty years of marriage that I wouldn't even notice. They would be wary of me going on this date, but unable to forbid me because my mom had already given me permission. Instead they would make excuses for me, probably blame my willingness to enter into risky situations in faraway states on the relationship I had with my father. It wouldn't be my fault, but I thought pity would be worse than lying so I hadn't let them in on the entirety of my plans.

When I made the decision of where to attend college, I had joined every Facebook group for DePaul that I could find. Always one to plan extensively, I had used them to search for potential roommates. Long after my housing forms were submitted I had received a message from Evan who found me through one of the groups and asked if I would reserve time for a date with him upon our move to Chicago that fall. We had an ongoing, intermittent conversation

throughout much of the summer, and when I found out that he was from California, I mentioned that I would be visiting in August.

I was surprised when he suggested that he make the two-hour drive from his home in Orange County to spend time with me while I was there. I had agreed to meet him, imagining making a cross-country trip and spending a spontaneous day with a stranger was exciting, especially on the heels of yet another break-up with my high school boyfriend, but like many of the plans I made with boys, I didn't think it would actually happen.

I stood in the driveway, glancing down at my phone every few seconds while trying to decide on a few good conversation starters before he arrived.

A metallic silver, box-shaped Scion maneuvered the corner wildly and rocketed around the turn toward the row of identical Southwestern houses where I stood. It was the exact model of cars my friends and I had made fun of every time we saw one in the school parking lot. We mocked the young drivers for cruising in their portable boxes around our hometown as if they were racing sleek sports cars. The box slowed slightly, jolting over the curb, and stopped a few feet short of me in the driveway.

I walked around to the passenger side, thinking of how ridiculous I must look climbing into this car as I lowered myself onto the seat and closed the door.

Evan was wearing a pair of dark aviator sunglasses. He had a wide leather bracelet on his right wrist, and a small diamond stud in one of his nostrils that mirrored my own. His hair was jet black and spiked in a way that was both haphazard and perfectly styled. An empty cigarette box and a beaded bookmark cluttered the console between our seats.

“Oh, hey,” he said in a deep voice that sounded as if he was just getting over a cold.

He angled his head toward me, cracking a smile and then removing the glasses from his eyes and placing them onto the dashboard. His eyes were a complicated mix of greens and light blues, rimmed by short, dark lashes that I had mistaken as costume makeup in some of his pictures online.

“I’m actually tan!” I blurted out and pointed to my arms that were several shades darker than they had been when I arrived at the beginning of the week.

Sometime during high school I had developed this awkward conversational habit—blurting out the first thing about myself that came to mind and therefore putting all of the attention on me. I replayed how stupid I must have sounded greeting him in this way, but held my arms out for him to admire nonetheless.

“Yeah, I thought you said you don’t get tan, Ash,” he said in reference to one of our online conversations, playfully nudging me with his elbow.

“This is a one-time exception,” I said and smiled at him, trying to match his lightheartedness.

He reversed out of the driveway as quickly as he had pulled into it, and it wasn’t until he turned his body to peer out the back, wrap-around window of the car that I realized how short he was. He was wearing a pair of worn-out black Converse, and he had to sit nearly on the edge of his seat in order for them to reach the pedals. When he turned his body to reverse, he wrapped one arm around his headrest and used it to hoist himself off the seat to gain view of the street behind him.

I didn’t consider myself particularly tall, but I knew that he would be shorter than me. I hoped that I would only be a few inches taller, but seeing the way he handled the car led me to



believe that there would be a noticeable difference between the two of us. I was glad I was wearing flip-flops.

“Sorry the car’s kind of a mess,” he said once we were out on the highway, “I used to like, live in it, so it has a bunch of shit in here.”

“You used to live in your car?” I asked.

“No, not like live, but live, you know? Like, I went to school a few hours from home but would drive home a lot so everything is in here. Come on, Ash. I’m not a bum.”

I laughed at what he thought was his comment about him being homeless, but I was more amused by the fact that he had already decided on a nickname for me and was using it relentlessly only a few minutes into our trip. It was the same name my ex-boyfriend had used on the occasions when he would tease me to the point where tears were brimming in my eyes and he was trying to bring me back over to the safe side of the line between joking and hurting. When Evan said it, it wasn’t mixed with the dangerous hint of affection and resentment. It sounded out of place and I was angry with myself for already comparing him to someone who was over two thousand miles away.

Evan scooted forward in his seat so he could reach the compartment beneath the stereo. He pulled out an adaptor, loaded the cassette into the tape deck, and handed me the attached cord.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“Play me some music. The CD player’s broken—only thing I’ve been able to listen to for months is MGMT. I wanna listen to music that you like.”

I pulled my iPod out of my purse even though I wished I had pretended like I didn't bring it with me. I loved music, but I felt that his entire impression of me depended on the quality of music I played during this car ride.

“So who are we meeting up with at Disneyland?” I asked while scrolling through my music options and hoping he would forget that there was nothing playing through the car's speakers.

“Oh, I don't know if we're still gonna go to Disney. I guess we'll just drive and figure it out as we go. I kinda wanted to show you Venice Beach.”

When we had discussed tentative plans for our time together, I agreed that Disneyland would be a good place to spend a few hours, mostly because I didn't think we would actually meet up in California. But, when I weighed the options, Disneyland seemed like the most neutral place for a date: plenty of people around, enough activities to avoid too many awkward silences, and the promise of friends of his with season passes who would meet us there. Now, as we made our way up the I-5 North, I realized Evan had vastly underestimated the time it would take us to travel anywhere we had discussed. One of the signs along the highway near Escondido advertised Disneyland as one hundred miles from where we were, and Venice Beach mapped in around an hour farther without traffic.

I put on a song to quiet the worries that began filling my head. Evan was bobbing his head and tapping his hands against the wheel as we continued down the endless stretch of highway. I hoped we would stop when we reached Anaheim, still hours off from our current location, but I felt bad telling Evan I didn't want to travel any farther than that. After all, he had woken up early during one of his last weeks at home in order to pick me up and was now willingly driving us across the state of California to spend the day together. Even though I was

obsessing over how I would get home in time to have a final dinner with my dad's family before my brother and I left in the morning, I kept my concerns to myself. And with each mile that we drove farther from San Diego, I found myself wishing I had never left Illinois, and that I had never decided to promise my time to the boy who was uprooting me from the only place on this coast that I knew.

We did not go to Disneyland. We finally made a left onto Venice Boulevard in the late afternoon, and circled the streets around the boardwalk in search of a parking spot as the sun shone at its highest point overhead. The sidewalks shed heat in layers of rippled waves as we walked from the lot where we parked blocks from the boardwalk. The waves dissipated as we crossed under the threshold of the Venice Beach boardwalk sign where people cluttered the wide path that runs parallel to the beach.

The air was thick with the smell of patchouli incense, dead fish that ebbed along the shoreline, and the slick sweetness of oil pastels. Evan and I wandered along the length of the boardwalk. He was more than a few inches shorter than I was, but I decided to ignore that, at least for the day. In Chicago, it may become a problem, but in California, I could look past the differences we had because I was on vacation and we weren't yet living in the city we would share for the next few years. We weren't holding hands, but I made sure to walk close enough that we could. He bought us each a cup of frozen yogurt, and that was the only indication of the nature of the time we were spending together, the subtlest of hints at the date he requested so boldly a few months earlier.

At the end of the stretch, in a whitewashed building on the far side of the boardwalk, we discovered a tattoo shop. Evan and I entered through the glass doors that were propped open and

began to explore the small shop where exhausted beachgoers were getting their bronzed skin inked by men covered in tattoos.

I wandered off to the perimeter of the shop where boards of stock tattoo designs hung from the walls. I had recently turned eighteen and already had two tattoos to prove it. In the wake of the break-up with my ex-boyfriend at the beginning of that summer, I had become even more obsessed with the idea of changing my appearance permanently. Something about tattoos signified to me that as soon as I got one, I would be a different person: the strong, independent, fearless woman I fancied myself to be at some indiscriminate time in the future. Of course that never happened, but I liked to imagine how each design would alter me—physically and emotionally—until I could forget about a relationship that I had already spent too much time on, and would only continue to waste more. In this private moment, I was glad that Evan had decided to flip through one of the artists' albums of sample work across the store from me.

I glanced over at him, where he leaned on a glass countertop that separated the observers from those being tattooed. I imagined getting a tattoo here in the shop that sprawled out onto the beach and had more natural light flooding its interior than light from the fluorescent bulbs overhead, but I knew I was just having another fantasy, and that we would walk out of the shop without something as permanent as a tattoo on either of our bodies.

We only spent about a half hour taking in the sights of the boardwalk. On our walk back to the car, we stopped at several of the artist stands on the side closest to the beach, where craftspeople displayed their artwork on fold-up tables, tarps laid on the baking concrete, and washboards. Many of the works looked like graffiti: bright colors sprayed at sharp angles onto slabs of drywall and canvas. Others were pop-art caricatures, most of Michael Jackson who had died earlier that summer. Evan and I paused at one last stand before we walked back to the car,

admiring the array of paintings of the deceased pop star. I thought it would be an opportunity for us to take a picture together on the boardwalk that I may never visit again. I had been photographing my vacation all week: the zoo, the fountains at Balboa Park, the beach where I surfed for the first time, dinners with my family, and I had planned to carry that habit into my day with Evan, documenting our time just as comprehensively as every other day of the trip. I thought about how the pictures would be received when I posted them on the Internet, allowing everyone to see me spending time with someone new across the country, but as I reached into my bag to feel around for my camera, I stopped.

I convinced myself that the artist, an older man in a pair of cutoff denim shorts with his shirt hanging from his whitewashed back pocket who was standing at the edge of the blue tarp and staring out at the ocean, would run away with my camera if I handed it off to him to snap a photo of us. I had visions of him abandoning his artwork forever and disappearing with all the evidence of my vacation with him. Although I could picture it with clarity, I knew that my real reason for not wanting a picture had more to do with my unwillingness to close off a segment of my past life forever. We left with no sign that we had ever been there.

The drive back from Los Angeles took longer as cars flooded the highway, leaving Los Angeles in a caravan during rush hour. In yet another executive decision, Evan decided we should tour Laguna Beach and stop in his hometown of Laguna Niguel until the traffic died down. During a standstill in traffic and a lull in our conversation, I received a phone call from Tyler, my ex-boyfriend. I had not heard from him since my high school graduation months earlier, so I was confused when his name appeared on the small screen, and I turned it away from Evan's line of sight. I debated whether or not I could answer the phone in a way that wouldn't reveal who I was talking to, but I couldn't trust my voice to stay steady—something I had

learned through years of arguing—and so I silenced the phone and looked toward Evan with a tight smile.

Before he had the chance to take his eyes off the taillights of the truck in front of us to look at me, my phone sounded again. This time a text message was waiting. I pressed the button to read it slowly, unsure if I was willing to invite this person into my day with Evan, but I did.

Tyler was contacting me because he had just found out his older sister was pregnant. She didn't know who the father was and he was worried what that would mean for her and her unborn baby. I was surprised by the news and I wanted to know more, but knew I had missed my opportunity to talk to him over the phone. If I called later, he wouldn't answer. I felt myself slipping back into the hold I was trying so desperately to escape. I felt flattered that he had decided to tell me as soon as he heard the news, that I was the one he had thought of. I had travelled across the country, planned this trip as the beginning of the new life I would be starting shortly in Chicago, in order to forget about him, and yet here he was, intruding on this day that I had forced myself to enjoy in order to prove to myself that the world was bigger than what I knew.

We arrived in Laguna Beach in the early evening. Again Evan paid for both of us when we ordered coffees at a shop before climbing dunes of sand until the earth flattened and freed us to kick off our shoes and walk along the beach. The setting sun was resplendent as it lingered over the water for a few more minutes of light, and we made our way up a staircase at the edge of the beach. There was a landing at the top that provided a view of the coastline. There were only a few families left along the water's edge—exhausted parents trying to round up their children before the sun dipped into the water for the night—and there was no one to encroach on our private lookout. I snapped a few pictures of the view, wanting to memorize the way the

water and sky collaborated to create this beautiful image, and knowing that my own knowledge of the story behind the day I took the pictures might be enough to satisfy me and convince me that I was going to be able to recreate my life without the person I had built it around.

I hoped Evan would finally work up the courage to reach out and grab my hand as we looked out onto the ocean waves, so metaphorically resonant of all the choices we had made to bring us here together and the opportunities that were ahead of each of us as we prepared to depart for college. I envisioned him planting a short, sweet kiss on my cheek as we stood there in the last glowing moments of sun, and us walking back to the car, hand in hand. But he didn't, and soon I suggested that we leave, pausing for a moment longer against the railing to give him one last chance. We left the same way we had come, both of us walking alone but gravitating toward each other as our feet imprinted side-by-side on the sand, to be washed away when the tide swept in later that night.

When the sun went down we drove to Evan's hometown and stopped at a café on the outer reaches of a strip mall. As the only customers in the restaurant, we sat outside and I hoped that we would eat dinner there. I had become accustomed to eating every few hours during vacation, and I was hungry since I had only had frozen yogurt earlier that day. Evan ordered a coffee and strawberry hookah for us, so I only ordered a latte. I was not the type of girl to deny myself food in the presence of a boy, but I had decided to conduct myself opposite of my regular actions so I ignored the grumblings of my unfed stomach.

When the hookah arrived Evan grabbed the hose and sucked on it until he was able to siphon large clouds of sweet, strawberry smoke from the glass chamber. He passed it to me and lit a cigarette for himself. I drew from the hose greedily, exhaling a haze of the syrupy smoke. In between puffs, I sipped from my mug. The latte was earthy, musky, and I took in the flavor

reluctantly, unable to differentiate between the sooty taste of espresso and the harsh smell of smoke from the cigarettes Evan kept lighting.

I grew lightheaded after just a few minutes of smoking, and in my disoriented state, looking through the haziness across the table at Evan, I almost convinced myself that he was someone I could date. I giggled at him flirtatiously, pretending that we were the type of couple I had always wanted to be, imagining the life we would never have together in Chicago.

“Gosh, Ash, I just can’t wait to be in Chicago,” he said, exhaling another trail of cigarette smoke and shaking his head to demonstrate his excitement.

“Me too,” I said in less-than-enthusiastic agreement.

I knew that he was excited for the Chicago that he would encounter in just a few weeks when he stepped off his plane and boarded the train that would take him to his new dorm room, but I was looking for a Chicago that would never be. I was caught between the version of myself that I was leaving behind in the suburbs of Chicago and the future self who I had not yet become. I felt guilty letting him think that our two Chicagos were the same because even then, I knew that they couldn’t be.

I stared out past the enclosure of the outdoor patio to a parking lot strewn with a few cars and dully-glowing neon signs. It was not the picturesque beauty we had glanced hours earlier on the beach, but it was still reminiscent of a world that I had not yet been exposed to, but one that was within my reach if I chose to pursue it. Music thudded from inside the café where a DJ had begun a set, playing music for the solitary man who had come into the restaurant. The man tossed his head back and forth from the middle of the dance floor, his hips undulating from side to side in brown corduroys as he turned circles on the hardwood. I sucked from the perishing



hookah, obscuring my view of the man in the room illuminated by multi-colored disco balls, and Evan cheered him on from behind the veil of smoke.

While we sat outside in the dark heat of summer, my family began texting me. I had missed our final dinner, and I would not get another chance to see my cousins before my brother and I left in the morning. I felt guilty that I had chosen to spend my last day with a stranger rather than the family I hadn't seen in years, and that I had lied to them about what I was doing. I began inventing stories about my day spent adventuring, creating personalities and names for the girls who would be living in the dorm with me and the boys who were transferring to DePaul together. I resented Evan for dragging me so far from my relatives' home, and for not abiding by the original timeline I had given him, but I had already missed dinner, and we were just getting to the point of fluid, easy conversation, so we stayed.

We laughed and teased each other and when he asked me if I had moved on from my ex-boyfriend, I almost believed myself when I said yes, looking out onto the nearly deserted parking lot and only barely glancing down at my phone to see if I had another message waiting for me.

We got into the car to drive the final leg of our journey well after the time I had quoted to my aunt and uncle that I would be home. We didn't say much on the ride back, all of our energy exhausted through the hours of driving and talking throughout the day, and we each took in our own views of the highway with which I was now familiar. Evan looked ahead, navigating the dangerous Californian roads where drivers sped past and darted between the many lanes at all hours of the day, but I shifted my body to the other side of the car, opting to look at the sights that ran along the side of the highway.

I had planned this day in order to pull my thoughts away from the boy in my past, but I knew that it was impossible. I had always believed that a change in location would be exactly

what I needed to dismiss him from my life with finality, but now that I had been given the opportunity, I knew that it wasn't going to be as easy as that. The boy in the car who was still unfamiliar to me was not a replacement for the one I had devoted years of my time to already. In the last few minutes on the highway, I tried to see things from Evan's perspective, looking ahead at the glaring taillights of cars, but I gravitated to the things we had just left behind, and so we returned to our separate views until we pulled into the driveway and said goodbye.

## THE LIQUOR DOESN'T KEEP PROMISES

I've never had a drink with my father, and I know I never will. Even if I could work through the resentment I've grown toward him in the years I silently gathered evidence to build the case that he wasn't the sort of man I needed in my life, I can't picture the two of us sitting across from one another, sharing a round of drinks, telling stories like two old friends.

Maybe that's because even when I did talk to my father, drinking was his secret: a relationship so intimate, so much stronger and durable than anything I would ever know, that his booze was shielded from the public view. Even when he needed a drink around others, it was never wine at a family reunion or a martini with another woman he drove us to meet. Instead it was a glass of wine kept on the rug beneath his chair at the head of the dining room table or the jugs and boxes of that same wine—one on each step down to his workshop in the basement—that he spent hours with while his young wife and kids slept upstairs. It was clear grain alcohol added to the cups he carried with him to the park for my brother's Little League practice, and then, it was opaque garbage bags full of generic brand vodka stowed in his trunk for easy access.

I've shared drinks with many other men in the years since I forfeited my opposition to drinking. I have a sixth sense that made me aware of any time alcohol was near me or, more importantly, near my father. The presence of the bottle, the cup, the jug glowed red in my brain, rendered me paralyzed, unable to confront him. I'm sure the men I drink with now can't know the complicated history I have with alcohol, the way I both hate it and depend on it to make me interesting to them.

One of my first boyfriends in high school—the sort you date for a few weeks' worth of movie releases, mostly because your friend is dating his friend and you still want to spend time with her—is the person who first talks to me about drinking. We're at the mall on a Sunday

afternoon, wandering the wide walkways, clammy hands clenched together, when we decide to sit against the side of the building and wait for our parents to pick us up.

“It sucks I can’t really drink anymore because of football,” he says out of nowhere, “but I did get pretty fucked up last weekend so that was fun. What about you? Do you ever drink?”

I guess this is what high school kids talk about, or what they’re supposed to do. I don’t really know because I have just started public high school. I came from a small Catholic school where the only girl our age who got drunk once was ignored by the other seventy kids in our grade for the rest of the week. Still only a couple of the kids from my junior high attend the same high school as me, and the pressure to recreate myself is perhaps even stronger than most fourteen-year-olds because I know so few people.

“Oh, yeah, sure. Just a couple times. I mean it’s not like I need alcohol to have a good time or anything,” I say, which is the line my friends and I repeat to each other on nights when we stay in and eat junk food and watch reruns of our favorite TV shows because we have promised each other we will not drink.

When he asks what I usually like to drink, I’m stumped. I don’t have a clue of the names of alcohols or what kids my age like. My options: tell him that I’m lying, that I’ve really never had a drink and don’t plan to because my father is a terrible alcoholic and it causes me too much pain to think of drinking, or delve into the recesses of my brain in hopes of coming up with a drink that doesn’t make me sound like a complete idiot. I take too long to respond and he’s looking at me in a way that shows he’s skeptical and I can only think of the one thing I’ve seen my dad drink nearly every day for as long as I can remember so I just say it: “Vodka.”

I learn how to drink, really drink, in my room in the middle of the night—doors locked—with Tyler: the first boy I’m sure I’m going to marry. I steal from the liquor bottles my mom

keeps on the top shelf in the pantry because I'm the last person she would ever expect to take them and because the only people who drink from those bottles are my grandparents when they visit on holidays. I fill water bottles with pours of Tanqueray, Smirnoff, Beefeater, Seagram's, Absolut. I replace the depleted alcohol with water from the tap, grow nervous when summer humidity causes water droplets to gather at the tops of the bottles. I stash my water bottles inside the boots in my closet, present them to Tyler when he climbs through the window to my room at the back of the house like they are bags of stolen money, which they might as well be in terms of the value they hold for us. We drink to get drunk, passing the bottles back and forth to each other across the length of my bed. We mix alcohols, chase them with a bottle of warm soda I find under the bed, laugh at the faces we make when one of us drinks something we hate.

"It tastes like shitty Christmas," I say after I try gin for the first time, cringing as I pass the bottle back to him and breathe through the burn of pine.

He's teaching me what it means to drink, to get drunk, to give the power of our thoughts and the will of our bodies to something that is outside us. He's teaching me what it means to be in love, to begin to feel fuzzy, see the world spin around me, and feel for him: the anchor in my sea of uncertainty. We drink until I'm confident enough to reach for him and kiss his neck and call him 'baby,' until I'm a version of myself that I've always wanted to be, but that I would never recognize or have the confidence to be when sober. During the day, I am guarded, unwilling to share any bit of myself with another person, shy to the point that I won't kiss my boyfriend on the cheek or sing in front of him, because I don't trust that he'll like me for all that I am, and I would hate to let him see all of me if that's the case. We fall asleep, limbs tangled in limbs, breaths potent with alcohol, until the sun through the window wakes us and he must disappear before my mother discovers our secret.

We drink whatever we can get our hands on, whatever one of his older sisters is willing to buy us. Bacardi Razz that is hot from me driving around with it in a ginger ale bottle in the trunk of my car all summer, Bacardi O, Smirnoff Blueberry, Jack, Jager, UV Blue, Jameson, Kahlua, Bailey's, Disaronno, Sailor Jerry's, Everclear. We drink with his friends from school, which means it's no longer just us, which means we fight more than we used to. I catch Tyler flirting with girls at the parties we frequent, see messages on his phone that I'm not supposed to see. I drink enough to bring it up to him and we argue. He tells me I have no business telling him what to do because he's already made one thing absolutely clear: we are not a couple. Still we drink and drink and some nights, he still loves me, like the day I graduate high school and I drive his friends and him to a party near my house. He leads me outside after we've finished off a bottle of Captain Morgan and tells me to look up at the stars.

"We're going to be together forever," he says, and it isn't a question, or a promise, but a demand.

I can see it—the life he wants for us—with perfect clarity, and I am thankful for that golden bottle we passed between each other until there was nothing left to drink because it brings us to this moment. It is going to bring us back together.

Other times drinking means pushing each other and yelling and being too drunk to care that his friends are watching us argue for the hundredth time. It's being so mad that I grab the keys to my car, speed through the neighborhood of his friend's house where we drink, just to come back minutes later. Drinking means him swearing that there's no one else, even though there has been someone else so many times, like the girl he begins dating almost as soon as the two of us end our relationship for good and the way that girl calls me 'sweetie' and tells me that I have nothing to worry about while I'm dating Tyler. Drinking means marching back up the steps

to his friend's room where everyone has dispersed because our fight had them worried the cops might be called, and lying across the couch, staring at my drunk reflection in the dark window, and continuing to stare at it when one of Tyler's friends makes his way back into the room and slides his hand in the space between the top of my tights and the bottom of my skirt and tells me how beautiful I am.

When we near the end of high school, a lot of my friends start to drink, too, and I feel proud that I can bring them to Tyler's friend's house, which is filled with kids from a high school that we don't go to, and therefore makes it all more fun and exclusive-sounding. One night after another fight with Tyler that ends with him taking off in his Pontiac Sunfire, I take shots of Jose Cuervo until I feel so sick that I must lie down beside the coffee table of our friend's room. I begin to get sick all over the blanket beneath me. The boy whose room we are in is mad because it seems offering his place up to drink ends in more bad times than good lately. My friend is sleeping with him—has been for the last couple months—so she tells him that she can handle it. She gathers a couple plastic bags that contained all the booze that has now been drank, holds them out in front of me, and tells me to get sick into them. It works for a while, but then I miss, and I hate myself because I can't even do something as simple as puke into a bag. No wonder my boyfriend doesn't want to be with me. I start crying and the snot from my tears burns with the bile. I'm wiping my face frantically—everything sticking to the hair on my arms—and she tells me to stop crying because people are trying to sleep.

“I just want him to love me. And you're a bitch,” I say and don't stop crying until morning.

Somehow I'm still friends with her by the time we reach the spring of our junior year, which is good because Tyler is taking another girl to his prom and telling me that we are done

forever, so I really need friends. Her dad is out of town one weekend and asks us to watch her baby sister. We drive around in my friend's Sebring convertible with the baby strapped into her car seat in the back. We change her diapers, take her to lunch at Olive Garden and feed her Cheerios while we eat soup, salad, and breadsticks, we read her stories, and get her to bed on time. We do such a good job that by Saturday night, we think we deserve a drink.

We raid my friend's dad's cabinets, and there is a lot more to choose from than there is at my house, but my friend's parents know she drinks and her dad would definitely notice if booze goes missing, so we decide that we can only afford to take two shots from each bottle: one for each of us. She has a shot glass collection in her room so we gather as many glasses into the bottoms of our shirts as we can and bring them to the kitchen where we fill them with peach schnapps, peppermint schnapps, Crown Royal, Captain Morgan, Wild Turkey, Maker's Mark. I have half a water bottle of Everclear in my bag, too, so we pour us each a shot of that. We lay a towel across the floor in her bedroom to soak up any of the alcohol that spills from the glasses and we make our way down the line. By the time we get to the Everclear, which I warn her is pretty strong, she is drunk and coughs it up almost immediately. We laugh about it and I feel a little proud that I can drink something so intense and she can't despite the fact that she's been drinking way longer than me.

When we are good and drunk, I call the new boy I am seeing. It's only been a few weeks since Tyler ended things with me, but I am desperate for company and for a boy to take me to prom and keep me distracted from my loneliness, so it's not so hard to get one of the boys from the grocery store where I work to date me. Michael doesn't know I drink, but I'm sure he figures it out pretty quickly when my friend and I call him and beg him to come over because we have leftover breadsticks from our lunch at Olive Garden that we want to give him. He drives over to



the house, idles his sports car in the street because my friend warns me that her dad might have told the neighbors to keep an eye on us, and I run barefoot outside to greet him.

Since the breakup with Tyler I've had a really hard time—so much so that I'm seeing a psychologist every Thursday since I took all the diet pills and aspirin I could find in my mom's medicine cabinet and then worried that I was really going to die. When I go on dates with Michael, I am quiet. I worry that if I talk too much, I may start to cry the way I do in the middle of sentences when I am in the psychologist's office and talking about why springtime makes me sad because it reminds me of when I first met Tyler. Now I am full of love. I nuzzle my face into his Michael's chest, wrap my arms around him tightly. After a while I pull away and hold up the grease-spotted bag.

“Look! I brought you breadsticks. I love you,” I say.

We say that we love each other because I think that we both really want to love each other, but I'm not sure that either of us does. I know I don't. He puts the bag into his car, hugs me for minutes that feel like hours, but also don't feel like long enough. When he leaves, he sends me a message that he's never seen me so loving, so happy to see him. It made him feel special, he says. I don't think I would've been able to fake it so well had I not been drunk on shots of eight different types of alcohol.

My friend and I are still very drunk and very bored and the baby is sleeping so we call one of our friends from grade school to come spend time with us. When he gets there, he realizes how drunk we are and sits stiffly on the end of her bed while we wrap our arms and legs over him and pose for pictures we'll be embarrassed of in the morning. The two of them go to school together and my friend decides that I should go to their prom that year.

“Timmy, why don’t you ask her? Please please please. You two have been friends forever it would be perfect,” she says.

It seems like a very good idea and I suddenly want nothing more than to go to prom with the boy next to me who I have known since he was seven and all skinny legs and slicked back hair.

“How do you want to be asked?” he asks me, which is a major faux pas in date asking, but I want to be his prom date so badly that I don’t even care.

“Mmm, I think I want cupcakes with my name on them. Pink frosting,” I say.

And it’s settled. I’m sure that I’ll be able to find someone who will love me as much as Tyler said he did, which he obviously didn’t since he is already dating someone else.

Later that night, after my friend is asleep, I sneak downstairs to the empty living room. I call Tyler. He is drunk, too, and tells me that he misses me, that he wishes we were going to one of our proms together. He tells me to touch myself, so I do, and even talk to him while I do it, too. I hear something move upstairs and hang up the phone; I don’t want anyone else to see me like this.

When Tyler and I finally break up for good, I am barely nineteen and living in a dorm of the college I attend on the north side of Chicago, which makes it tough to cry too much about it since I have a roommate who always seems to be in our room. Instead I talk her and a couple other people from our dorm into going to an apartment party that weekend and I say things like ‘I’m so happy I’m single’ and ‘I can’t believe I ever dated Tyler’ and I drink straight from a bottle of vodka. It’s fun for a while and I pass the bottle around, encouraging everyone else to do the same, and knowing that they have to because I’m grieving and it’s their job to make me feel better, but then my friends are tired and want to leave. I’m still having a good time, doing

all the things I couldn't do all those years I wasn't single, so I tell them to go ahead, that I can walk the couple blocks back to our dorm alone.

I enjoy myself because a few of my friends from the suburbs who are older than me, have a few more years of drinking under their belts, are here and so we drink more. I follow a boy from my communications lecture out to the back porch and watch him smoke a cigarette. I learn this is his apartment, which is suddenly very sexy to me, and so when he finishes his cigarette, I approach him, pull down the brim of his knitted hat, kiss him hard. I bite him, too, and he pulls away to check his lip for blood, but then goes back to kissing me. He takes a quick break, tells me that he's going to sit next to me in our class on Monday, that he'll bring me a raspberry white chocolate mocha—my favorite—and we'll share it while we listen to lectures on sexual attraction.

Beneath our kiss, I laugh a little, because it's so easy for me to replace one boy with the next, and I feel powerful just for a second. I undo his buckle, reach under his boxers, and it might go further than that—I'm not really sure how the whole hook-up thing goes—except that I bend over and get sick onto a pile of roofing shingles. My whole façade as the cool, mysterious girl with unlimited alcohol tolerance and wonderful kissing skills is gone, and for that reason I begin to cry. He leads me off the roof, back into the kitchen, and before I can help myself, I get sick in the middle of the floor. This time there is an audience. My friends apologize on my behalf. They ask me if I'm okay, but I just cry and stumble out onto the snow-covered street as the sun begins to rise.

When I'm twenty-one drinking means meeting men every time I go out. I judge the success of a night of drinking by how many potential future boyfriends I meet. On the day my college boyfriend, Connor, and I break up, I cry for a couple hours, shower, get ready, and go

out. It's just like the countless nights my roommates and I went out in the months that led to my breakup, except that tonight, when the DJ plays Beyonce's "Single Ladies," we sing along to it a little louder because it has meaning to us now that we are all truly single.

We start drinking shots of Fireball with a group of men who we find out live a few blocks from us. I talk with one of the men who has recently graduated from University of Wisconsin. I'm flirting with the line between charming and too drunk: a boundary I haven't yet learned to command. Mid-sentence, I cut him off and begin kissing him, which I am learning is my drunken habit. When I pull away he looks shocked.

"I'm sorry. That was probably out of line. It's just I'm recently out of a long-term relationship and trying to make sense of this whole dating scene thing again. Sorry."

When he asks how long ago my relationship ended and I tell him earlier that day, he shakes his head and kisses me again.

I don't know enough about drinking or my preferences to have a "go-to" drink so when men offer to buy me a drink, I tell them that I'll drink anything. My only stipulation is no Jameson.

"No Jameson? Okay," they say.

They watch me take shots of Sambuca, Fireball, Bacardi 151. I finish with a smile on my face.

I know that studies show how unlikely someone is to meet their soul mate at a bar, but I figure that with the number of men I meet when we go out, I have a pretty good chance at defying those odds. When we exchange numbers, and some of them remember me well enough to ask me on the date they promise, I know that I should settle for nothing less than dinner, but I can't help but be excited when they suggest that we meet at a bar. I know that at a bar I'll be

able to have enough drinks to charm them, to show them the wittiest, most quick-thinking version of myself.

My roommates question my dating habits. They tell me that if a man really likes me, he's going to make the effort to wine and dine me and not suggest that I meet him for three-dollar Coronas at the bar between our houses. I'm sure they're right, but I don't seem to be meeting the sort of guys they're talking about. Maybe I don't deserve to be with a guy who would go out of his way to take me to dinner instead of drinks. They tell me that I need to be setting my standards higher, but I can barely get guys to care about me as it is. Won't there be even less men if I ignore the ones who do the bare minimum to get my attention?

Rather than raise my expectations, I aim for volume. I figure that sheer odds mean I will find a man—the right man—by flirting with anyone who offers me a drink. If we go out and my roommates meet men and I don't, I am sure that I'm going to be alone forever. I cry and cause a scene and take attention away from the men my roommates bring home because I need to be comforted, and I don't have a man to do it.

At the end of my twenty-first year, my roommates and I travel to Europe together. One of them has begun dating a man from Dublin. We are there to visit with him and his friends. On the last night in Dublin, before we make our way to Prague, the roommate with whom I am sharing a hotel room hits it off with a lacrosse buddy of my other roommate's boyfriend. They want the hotel room to themselves, but that means I have nowhere to go. I haven't met anyone that night.

I suggest that I sleep on the floor of the other girl and her boyfriend's room, but they are only able to see each other for a couple weeks each year and her boyfriend is not interested in spending one of their nights together as a trio. I've never felt more utterly alone. We were at a

bar and no man had even looked at me and now everyone was partnering off in a foreign country and trying to kick me out of the room I paid for. I take off in the direction of our hotel. At a street corner, a woman in a dress and leather jacket waits, watching me stomp along the nearly deserted streets with my arms crossed against my chest. She stares at me intently enough that I'm sure she's going to ask if I'm okay and I know that I will appreciate her concern that no one else seems to be displaying toward me. When I'm next to her, striding past toward the hotel, she starts to speak and I'm about to thank her when I realize that she doesn't want to know what is wrong; she's asking for money.

"Fuck you," I say and keep walking.

Back at the hotel I'm gathering my pillow and the sheets off my bed to sleep in the hallway when my roommate returns with her new lacrosse man and tells me I'm being ridiculous. I fall asleep facing the wall against my twin bed. I grow lonelier with each whisper passed between the two of them in the other bed.

The next night, we are in Prague. It's happy hour in the lobby bar of our hostel and we chug all-you-can-drink wine so that we can get our money's worth before we leave for a citywide pub-crawl. My roommate gulps wine with one hand and waves the bartender over with the other. When her glass is refilled she lets out a frustrated sigh.

"Gosh, Ashlee, why couldn't you just stay in the other room last night?"

She's laughing, but I know that she isn't joking, and I feel like more of a hassle than I did the night before.

"Because they didn't want me in their room, either. Sorry. I know that I'm just the ugly, sad friend who gets in the way," I say and tip the glass of chardonnay toward me as my eyes burn from tears and the dryness of the wine.

They tell me I'm beautiful and intelligent and that everyone would agree would I just stop giving my time to men who didn't value me, but I just know I'm the ugly, sad friend always intruding on their fun. They tell me that I need to be happy for them and that it's not always about me having a man to keep me entertained when we go to the bars. When I'm done feeling sorry for myself, I tell them I will try to be more supportive and that I won't be so crazed for attention when we're out.

We finish off another bottle of wine and we're back to laughing about the adventures of the vacation thus far, but that night, on a cobblestone street in Prague outside of a late-night burrito stand, I'm smitten with an Australian man. We exchange email addresses and make plans to meet the next night.

Sometimes I do meet a man who I think really cares for me—a man I feel excited about getting to know for longer than that first, drunken night we meet. When this happens, it is always a challenge to decide when to tell them about my father's drinking. I have to wait the right amount of dates to be sure that it is information they may need to know about me and not just my usual over-sharing. It is usually over drinks, sometime between the second and third of the night: enough so that I feel bold enough to broach the subject and explain it like it's no big deal, but not so much that I sound sloppy or slur over my words in a way that makes them worry whether or not I'm just like my father.

If they thank me for sharing that with them, if they tell me that they understand, and they lean over and kiss me, I am theirs for as long as they want, and we drink until we are closer to love.

I sit and smile. I sip and chug. I nod yes—yes, please—when they ask if I want another. My language of alcohol is a silent one. It's me downing that shot, slurping down the last bits of

a drink, touching the leg of the man on the barstool beside me, leaning into him when he calls me beautiful, biting my lip when he tells me how nice I look. It's me committing his drink of choice to memory so I can surprise him with it later, stumbling out into the streets hand in hand, lying in bed next to each other, smiling at another compliment. It's me learning the taste of these drinks, the taste of this man, and hoping that we can keep all the drunken promises we make.



## HERE WE ARE, AFTER DARK

For us, there was no daylight.

Ours was a relationship of perpetual dinginess. It was the clay-tiled basement bar where we worked, illuminated by red and green chili pepper lights strung along the bar. It was him behind that bar sneaking me Jäger bombs in dusty glasses, and me on the other side of it, leaning into the ice well where water pooled in the crevices, soaking through my shirt until the dampness pressed to my stomach—anything to hear another secret, another compliment passed between the two of us.

It was the darkness that stretched down Belmont Avenue, broken up by the yellowing streetlights I passed on the bus that carried me from my apartment on the north side of Chicago to his near the city limits on the far west side. It was the flickering lamps of the subway sometimes hidden by the trains that passed through the station. It was the Disco City Records sign—once brilliant and blinking from the bulbs that outlined it, that now dully flashed, all but three bulbs dead—that greeted me on the empty street when I surfaced from the underground tunnel. It was the apartment above the record store that he shared with his drug-dealing roommates and one mail-order bride from Ukraine, with the windows that faced the street blacked out and the lights inside always kept dim. It was the darkness of his bedroom, illuminated only by the glowing orange nugget of weed or the half-smoked cigarette he would wake to light, to smoke once, twice, three times an hour from a dead sleep, making it impossible for me to sleep through the night when beside him.

Daylight was reserved for our separate lives, or at least my own. As far as I was concerned, he was a creature of the night: a man who made his living in dark bars and sparsely lit fine-dining rooms, who thrived on drags of cigarettes, puffs of weed, pulls from handles of

whiskey, in the shade of darkness. As soon as the sun rose, I was out of his bed, down the steps to the subway, up the ramp to the bus shelter where I'd pull the fur-lined hood of my winter coat over my head to hide as far back as I could, muddy slush splashing onto my jeans as the bus approached, and into my apartment—to my college education, my roommates, the boy on the other side of the city who said he loved me and really did. His daylight hours were spent sleeping until it was time to go to work, leaving himself barely enough time to shower, pick up weed from his dealer, and hop in a cab to downtown. His life hardly existed at all outside the dark spaces where we came together.

His name was James, though he could have been anyone. And eventually he was anyone; I filled the months toward the end of my college relationship with men I met at bars who gave me the sort of attention I was convinced my boyfriend could not. James was the bartender at Twisted Lizard: the restaurant where I got a serving job near my college campus. He had a tattoo of Bob Marley on his upper arm and, as I soon discovered, a collage of weed leaves with jagged edges on the underside of it. He was from my hometown: a suburb forty miles north of the restaurant where we worked. He'd been to prison for ninety days after getting three DUIs before he turned twenty-one, and one of my mom's friends had been his lawyer. He'd barely finished high school. But he knew how to order expensive bottles of wine that I drank even though I didn't know enough about wine to like or dislike it. He took me out for tiny cuts of the most tender filet mignon that we shared over martinis. He took me back to his apartment where he let me drink straight from the bottle of Jäger he seemed to always keep in his fridge and he piled my legs into his lap and asked me how we came from the same town when I was so much better than him, so much more extraordinary than anyone he'd ever met from there.

I was twenty, and then twenty-one, and simultaneously wishing I was older than I was while claiming the innocence and naiveté that the birthdate on the ID I used with increasing frequency allowed me. My boyfriend at the time—a sweet, lanky boy from Minnesota named Connor, who had dreams of becoming a high school history teacher—had predicted the downfall of our relationship for months. Connor worried when I got the job where the owner of the restaurant forged my birthdate, making me a year older since I was not yet of drinking age, asking only that I “cut my hair or something” to look old enough to sip the sticky-sweet pitchers of margaritas he poured us after, or sometimes during, our shifts. Connor worried when I moved in with two girls—both of whom were old enough to go out to the bars on Clark Street outside Wrigley Field. He worried about anything that might show me there was a life out there bigger than our young sort of love: a love we’d forged from the hotel-looking dorm where we had lived across the hall from one another, to his pricey, old apartment that he rented a few blocks from our college campus where I practically lived, notebook in hand, pretending to be a writer while he and his roommates played video games and smoked pot.

His apartment was one where we nestled into the worn corduroy couch as the snow settled over the dog-shit ridden patch of a yard out front; it was a place to where I had walked two miles in a snowstorm, the handles of grocery bags stretched over my winter coat and layered up both my arms, so we could hide from the city as we watched over three feet of snow fall during a blizzard in the winter of 2011 that kept us out of classes for a week. The air of our world was heavy and sweet with the weed that he smoked and the fruity hookah that I did. But the allure of being able to do things without him, to drink and flirt and be seen as desirable, along with his constant worry and reiteration that I would leave him, drew me to a life outside the one we’d fabricated, one we’d tucked under flannel blankets and swathed in the thick smoke that

came from our mouths and the fireplace where we burned so many things the last winter we were together.

During that Midwest winter, the basement cantina with its few ground-level windows was always dark, especially because the sun went down even before my afternoon classes let out and I walked to work, but there was still enough light inside to see that James had piercing blue-green eyes that lit up when he smiled to reveal slightly crooked teeth. It was a mischievous sort of smile that made you feel as if you'd just unknowingly conspired with him on something, which I sort of had when he slid a shot of tequila across the bar and picked up another, gesturing toward me with a nod during my first shift.

"I can't take that," I said and pushed the glass back toward him, watching the salt from the rim dissolve into the clear liquid.

"Sure you can. It's right there."

"No, I'm too new. It's my first shift. I don't wanna piss anyone off," I said, and what I meant was that I wasn't yet old enough to drink.

"I'm new, too. Been here like three weeks. Cheers," he said and took both shots, exhaling the burn of agave and salt in a tight-lipped breath.

We didn't work the same shift for another month. When a group of kids from my school came in for pitchers of margaritas as the restaurant was about to close, James and I offered to stick around to serve them and we sent the rest of the staff home. When the men in the kitchen cleaned up and left, the only light in the place came from the computer next to the server station. I used the computer to play dance remixes of indie songs I liked, hoping to impress him. Mostly, I forgot about the table of students beside us who had taken to lighting their cigarettes at the table instead of going outside. James kept my pint glass full with margaritas, then sangria, and he

mixed us rounds of shots that I took with increasing boldness, wishing I was old enough to invite him out for a drink at the late-night bar across the street. After the guests left, I cleared their table and asked him what else I could do for him before I left.

“Just this,” he said and pushed one more Jäger bomb and his phone with a contact created for me to put my number in toward me. By the time I got home that night, drunk and heady with the possibility of this flirtation, I’d emailed the restaurant owner to modify my schedule so he and I could work together every Tuesday.

Our first date was the next weekend. By then he knew I had a boyfriend, but he didn’t seem to care so I pretended not to, either. Connor was busy all night with work, and so I agreed to meet James at the Chicago Firehouse: the upscale restaurant where he worked just south of downtown. He mixed me a couple drinks before leaving me alone in the dining room nicer than anywhere I had ever eaten so he could change out of his uniform. We took taxis all over the city and dined at a new steakhouse. He leaned in to kiss my cheek as we waited for a cab that the valet had called us after dinner and I pretended not to notice. When we got back to his apartment, no one was home so he turned on a movie in the living room and went to the kitchen for a bottle of Jäger and a large can of Red Bull. He took a hearty sip of each and extended them to me. I did the same, but when I finished, I pulled both bottles close to me and cradled them against my stomach. My legs were curled under me, but we were sitting close enough on the couch that my knees grazed the side of his leg. I wasn’t sure if I held the bottles close as a physical barrier that would keep us from doing anything that I couldn’t justify or if I needed the promise of getting more drunk less than an arm’s reach away. Regardless, he took both objects out of my hands, set them on the coffee table that was water-marked with rings from cups and scattered with ash trays and cigarette butts, and leaned in to kiss me.

“I’m nervous,” I said when I pulled away after a few seconds, and I wasn’t sure if I meant I was nervous about kissing him or I was nervous about what all of it meant.

Maybe it was because I knew that from then, there was no turning back from what we were doing. No longer passably innocent flirtation, as soon as I kissed him, I’d committed to nights when I would call my boyfriend to say goodnight, wait for my roommates to fall asleep, before I’d quietly open our front door, walk down the two flights of stairs, and out onto our street. I’d committed to waiting for the bus at the stop at the end of my street, scanning the growing crowd for a face I might recognize, thinking of an excuse for why I was out past midnight. At that time of night, they were all strangers: dark, tired faces of people just getting off work, eager for the vehicle that would take them home to the families they provided for. They weren’t interested in me or the depth of my deceptions. I wanted to say that I was being seduced, that an older man had taken hold of me and there was nothing I could do about it, but I was the one sneaking around the city in the middle of the night to spend a couple hours with him. I was the one with the boyfriend and I was the one who should have known better. And I did; if I thought about it in those rare hours alone when I was not with either of the men I had focused my life around, I hated myself for what I was doing, but it was not enough to dissuade my need to be wanted.

“So you’re a girl. I’m sure you’ve already planned your wedding. What’s it like? Not a destination wedding, I hope,” he asked one night as I lay my head across his stomach.

It was almost three in the morning, but I’d found a way to go without sleep in those months when I lived for the middle of the night.

“Oh no, not a destination. Maybe on a beach, though,” I told him.

“That’d be fine with me. Illinois Beach State Park?”

Illinois Beach State Park was a little resort on Lake Michigan near our hometown and it excited me to talk about a part of my home with someone who knew exactly how the waves crashed against the rocks up there, how they looked and sounded and felt.

“My mom says she’s the one who gets to have a beach wedding, although I think I’ll get married before her,” I said.

I told him the story of my mom and dad eloping, of how I felt bad for my mother who had so desperately wanted a beautiful wedding, but instead got a Laura Ashley dress purchased from the clearance rack, a gazebo, and a man who had more secrets than she could have hoped to uncover at her young age. She was now dating a man who was remarkably unromantic, and he was always coming up with new reasons to push his proposal back.

“That’d be fine with me, too. An elopement, I mean,” he said.

And it was fun to talk like that for a while, like we could run off and get married and no one would be around to tell us all the reasons it wouldn’t work, just like my mom must have when she decided to marry my father.

“I want to be able to support my kids, to go into Toys-R-Us and buy them whatever they want,” he said.

“So no food stamps,” I said, making a joke about many of the people in our hometown who seemed to misuse government assistance.

“Oh, definitely no food stamps. Our kids would have whatever they wanted.”

I started to fall asleep, knowing I would have to leave in a half hour or so to make it back to my apartment before one of my roommates got up for class.

“Where’d you come from? Definitely not Waukegan,” he said and stroked my hair.

I pretended to be asleep, but the amazement in his voice played over in my head the next day.

That Christmas, I made James go home for the holidays. His dad had died from liver failure due to alcoholism when James was still in high school. He'd gotten charged with his DUIs in the years after his father's death, and he blamed his recklessness on the untimeliness of losing his father. When James got out of prison, he quit his job at the Olive Garden near the amusement park in our town and moved to Chicago, where he couldn't tempt himself with the danger of drunk driving. He'd only been home a handful of times in the eight years that followed, and he never stayed the night in the suburbs. The house and his mother's loneliness made him uncomfortable.

I sweetened the appeal with the promise that I would be able to see him and we wouldn't even have to sneak around because my boyfriend was back home in Minnesota. James worked brunch at the Firehouse on Christmas Eve and then took the Metra back to the suburbs. I picked him up from the station and drove him to his mom's house so he could surprise his family. He brought two bottles of nice wine with him even though his mom worried about his drinking, but from the way he told me about it later, they were so excited to see him, everyone had a glass of wine and his uncle even helped him finish the second bottle. Still, a few hours later, he called me. His mother wanted him to stay, had made the bed in his old room with his favorite blanket, but he was desperate to get to the train station. I didn't want to take him from his family on the holidays, but I picked him up anyways.

He introduced me as the girl he was going to marry, and then as his "Runaround Sue," something he often called me because of the way I led him on despite having a boyfriend on the other side of town, but also a reference to the Oldies music he used to help his mom clean the



house to on Saturday mornings. I'm not sure if she got the reference, but I thought it was sweet to try to let her know he still remembered things like that. He promised he would be back after we spent a couple of hours with my family.

On the way to the train station, he made me stop at Club18: a seedy liquor store and nightclub where my mom often busted clients of hers who were on probation. I wasn't old enough to go in so he instructed me to keep the doors and windows locked and not look at anyone who might try to talk to me. The windows frosted over as I waited ten, twenty minutes for him. He came out with a pack of cigarettes, a can of chewing tobacco, and a bottle of Jameson.

The roads were slick as we drove to the train station and when we got there, we only had a minute before the train was scheduled to arrive. That minute passed and there was still no sign of the train. We waited. He rubbed my cheek with a gloved hand.

We were the only car in the lot. Finally I pulled the train schedule up on my phone, making sure he had checked the holiday schedule when he told me the time of the train. He had not. He had missed the last train into the city by three hours. A solitary cab rolled down the ramp to the station and paused at the entrance to the waiting hall. James ran out after the car, ducked his head down to talk to the driver, and ran back to me. The woman had her young daughter riding along with her since it was Christmas Eve and she didn't want to split up her family, but they would take him back to Chicago for one hundred and forty dollars. He counted the money out from his clip and leaned over to kiss me.

"Merry Christmas, babe. Thanks for making me do this," he said, and got in the warm cab.

I couldn't imagine what it was like to be a stranger in your own childhood home, to be so eager to get away from the memories there that you'd rather pay a couple hundred dollars to return to a dark, empty apartment that smelled like smoke and dog hair, to wake up on Christmas morning alone. On the way back to my mom's house, I passed my father's home. Garlands of pine and velvet red bows were draped from the crown molding on the windows outside. The statues in the snow-covered garden were wrapped in white Christmas lights. All the lights in the house were off except the one over the sink in the kitchen and the TV in the living room, which meant that my father was up, and that he was drinking, and that he would probably stay there until near sun-up, watching reruns of *Antiques Roadshow* and planning the Christmas dinner that he should have cooked for my brother and me. I'd worried that he and James were too similar as early as our first date, when James told me the stories of how his drinking had ended in a felony. Now they'd chosen to spend their Christmas Eves the same way.

The last time I saw James while I had a boyfriend was on Valentine's Day. I had gone to an early dinner with my boyfriend, his roommate, and his roommate's girlfriend, had gone home to get some schoolwork done, and had finally made my way to the west side when I knew my boyfriend was asleep. Conner had grown more suspicious and I worried about him coming to my apartment in the middle of the night, especially since I'd given him a key in hopes of quieting his insecurities, and discovering that I wasn't there. James had cooked dinner for us and selected a bottle of wine from work, but by the time I got there, the food was cold and the wine bottle near empty. The excitement of sneaking around, the adrenaline that allowed me so little sleep, had worn off on both of us. He had gotten fired from Twisted Lizard when new management took over, so we were no longer seeing each other a few times a week, no longer making comments in front of our coworkers that had secret meaning to us. He was frustrated

that I still hadn't left my boyfriend for him; I was frustrated that he hadn't given me enough reasons to. I gave him a kiss and left without even trying to sleep beside him.

When I was finally single we decided to give ourselves a shot at dating without the constraints that my being in a relationship limited us to. Even then, the July sun had already settled itself behind the tall buildings of downtown by the time I made my way to the South Loop for dinner, hours after he'd originally proposed our date. We hadn't seen each other since Valentine's Day. We met at a newly opened tavern across the street from the Chicago Firehouse: the same block as our first date.

"You look gorgeous, hun," he said and stood up to hug me, his eyes just barely level with my own.

We sat at the bar and, like always, he ordered for us both. Fingerling potatoes, bacon wrapped dates, scallops and fava beans, flatbread with a balsamic reduction. Cocktails that I was finally old enough to drink with ginger liqueurs, egg whites, clarified milk, fried rosemary, fresh sprigs of mint. His friend Chris joined us an hour into the date, the pressed white shirt and tie that seemed to be the standard in fine dining draped over the handle of his leather messenger bag. I was preparing to take the LSAT and, since Chris's brother was a lawyer, we talked about my desire to go into family and child law. James ordered another round of drinks. The two of them carried theirs, mauve-colored and smelling of cinnamon, outside to the wide city sidewalk where they smoked so many cigarettes that I was sure they had forgotten about me.

I felt arms drape over my neck, smelled the ashy, earthy Marlboros stale on his mouth before I turned my head to see James.

"Chris says I'm crazy if I don't marry you," he whispered, pressing his face into the side of mine before I could face him completely.

The thought of any man wanting to commit his life to me in such a permanent way had always been enough to make me giddy with hope and possibility. Nights when men I'd dated had too much to drink and confessed some sort of love, infatuation, and wonderment with me replayed in my mind long after the relationships themselves ended. I smiled back. I might've even kissed him had the smell of the cigarettes on his breath not come to settle in the space between us. I plucked a lemon wedge from the bar and handed it to him so he could squeeze the juice across his fingers. It was a trick I'd watched him carry out many times a night when we worked together after he'd crept up the back stairway, past the crates of well tequila, and into the alley to smoke a quick cigarette. When he put his arms around me again, I could still smell the smoke, hardly concealed by citrus.

We finished our drinks and James left an exorbitant tip before the three of us stumbled back into the summer night. The boys wanted me to go to The Owl with them. It was a late night craft beer bar near James' apartment where James had promised to take me when I finally turned twenty-one, but we had never gotten around to it. Perhaps because I was newly single or because the smell of cigarettes on his breath, his hands, and his clothes had reminded me of the sleepless nights I'd spent in his bed listening to him breathe smoke in and out all night, I declined.

I knew that I would go out for more drinks later that night, but it wouldn't be with James. I was wearing a low-cut dress with an open back that showed off some of the tattoos I'd gotten since the last time I saw him, and it was too appealing for me to only spend my night with one man. It meant I could go out to the bars near my house and find another man, many men, who would want me and need me in the desperate, irresistible way that James had for the better part of a year, and I knew that attention from just one man would never be enough for me. James

palmed me a twenty-dollar bill, kissed me on the cheek, and hailed two cabs. He and Chris climbed into the front one and I took the one in back. I watched their car take a three-point turn to change directions and head toward Logan Square, where they would drink until the sun came up because the bars stayed open late enough to do that and because they'd never learned to do anything else.

That same summer, on another night with liveliness and possibility that is only possible in a big city like Chicago, I met my ex-boyfriend for drinks at a bar near his new apartment. Connor had been the one to officially end our relationship after too many nights I'd neglected to come home to him, too many nights when I'd chosen to go out with my roommates to the same bars to meet new men who were really all the same, too. At the time, he'd said we needed to take a break so I could figure out my priorities, which is what I'd been trying to tell him for months, anyway, but within a month of the break-up, it had become clear it was more permanent than that. Still, we'd been friends well before our relationship, so we fell back into friendship easily, but it was the first time we'd seen each other since becoming single.

After a couple drinks, he asked about James. I was sure he'd always known about him—he'd heard my phone buzzing nonstop as we sat on the couch watching movies and seen me pretending like I couldn't hear it until he got up to go to the bathroom. He'd perceived my distance when he'd come to visit me at work on days that James was behind the bar. I told him that while I had fallen for James a bit, and that we certainly flirted, nothing more ever happened. It was a half-truth. He told me he wished I had said the opposite: that something physical had transpired—a mistake—but that it didn't mean anything. For him, that would have been easier to accept.

I was shocked by his reaction—how could someone want his or her significant other to sleep with somebody else? I had always assumed that was the worst possible outcome because any time I suspected a man had cheated on me, I instantly thought of the physical act of it, and that was what made me sick to my stomach. I'd always pictured the man I loved being touched by another woman and was sure it was sex that hurt the relationship the most, but as I considered Connor's opinion, I found it more valid. Wasn't it worse to lose the affections of someone who you thought you had won over, whose love you had worked to earn?

My mother and father's relationship was born out of cheating. My father was a bachelor well into his forties, juggling multiple girlfriends, adding their pictures to a photo album I'd find years later in the attic of his home. I'm sure he'd had at least a couple girlfriends when he first met my mother. My father, a criminal justice professor who had given up on pursuing his doctorate at University of Chicago, lived just a few blocks away from the hardware store where my mom worked on break from college. He'd purchased a sturdy Victorian redbrick house that had been sectioned off into apartments for most of the twentieth century. He'd moved into one of the units and slowly bought the tenants out until he could begin renovations to return to the home to the way it would've appeared when it was first constructed in the 1850s.

My mother had a boyfriend: her high school sweetheart, who went to college in downstate Illinois and wrote her a letter each day. Somehow my father's visits to the hardware store evolved into dates and that next summer they planned to elope on a summer trip to her college campus. She'd been re-hired by her stepdad at the restaurant he owned and she and my dad were scheduled to leave after her shift, but they got into a fight and my dad called it off. Hours later, they drove to Indiana anyway and were married in a gazebo on her college campus.

Right before they made the five-hour trip to Bloomington, she called her high school sweetheart to let him know she had met someone.

Marriage and a family did not keep my father from his women, and my mother often caught him with women from the softball team he coached, or later, when he added their pictures to the album he still kept. After they divorced, he turned to online dating. Though he dated women all over the country, he still had women in town he could call on nights when my brother and I didn't stay with him.

While my father has dated many women, my mother has been with her boyfriend since she separated from my father. Still there were instances when she strayed. Men from high school reconnected with her on social media, complimented her (something she complained to them that her boyfriend did not do enough), told her what a crush they had on her in high school, and begged for the chance to take her out. She often told me about them and we'd dig out her yearbooks, look them up, maybe joke about their feathered hair or wide-rimmed glasses, but I noticed how in the next few days, she'd check her messages more frequently. Several times I'd caught glimpses of messages from these men, reminiscing on the night before when they had met for drinks, planning vacations they'd never take together.

It seemed that when my father cheated, it was more for the physical thrill of it, taking on as many women as he could with little regard or moral obligation to the women he was exclusive with. For my mother, it was the attention. She wanted that emotional aspect of romance that she didn't get from her boyfriend: a stoic man who had never married or had children and who had only known what it was like to care for one pet in his life. She needed those constant affirmations of her beauty and worth, and the other men in her life were willing to give her that. Did her reasons for straying from her relationship warrant more sympathy than my father's? Is

one form of cheating more “okay” than another, like Connor seemed to be telling me after our relationship had ended? Was I destined to continue this pattern because it was what my parents did, or because it is what humans were inclined to do? Will we always want to leave the safety and trust of those we love in favor of something more dangerous? Could it ever pay off?

My own motivations fell somewhere in the middle. I began each new relationship with the optimism of a hopeless romantic. I fantasized over the idea of spending the rest of my life with just one person, but as the initial fascination wore off, I sometimes couldn't resist the attention of a new person to get to know, or more often, a new person to change, to save. The secrecy of it all made it more exciting.

Connor had been someone who needed changing once, too. When we first met in our freshman year dorm, he smoked cigarettes despite the fact that they cost ten dollars a pack in his new residence of Chicago and that he'd already had one collapsed lung and it was only a matter of time until the other did the same. He dropped acid on weekends with his friends from Minnesota who went to art school downtown and he sold weed out of a locked wooden chest he'd asked his father to build him with a false bottom while on Christmas break our freshman year. His father didn't ask why.

The drugs stopped almost immediately; I'd told him it made me sad to think of him in a compromised state of mind, one that I was unfamiliar with, and one that could end up hurting him. We ignored the way his friends from home teased him when he stopped and instead we'd unscrew the cap of whatever bottle we brought to the party and pass it between us for another round. The cigarettes were a tougher habit to halt. I'd alternate between the understanding girlfriend who knew everyone had bad days and promised tomorrow was another chance to try, the suspicious girlfriend who searched the pockets of his pants and jackets and sniffed his hair



and the corners of his mouth as he slept, the emotional girlfriend who sat on the front stoop of his apartment and cried while I watched him smoke a cigarette with the groundskeeper who lived in the basement studio. About a year into our relationship, he stopped— perhaps due to my nagging or perhaps due to the five-hundred-dollar incentive his boss had offered anyone who could quit a bad habit for a year.

And then he no longer needed saving. He was a quiet boy with rimless glasses and thick brown hair who got good grades so he could become a teacher and came from a stable family and loved me and would never under any circumstances cheat and I didn't even feel like I had to snoop around to know that for sure. He was shopping for engagement rings in a shy, lazy way when I met James.

James had been a new project altogether: someone who needed saving and changing and a sense of direction and everything else I had grown to believe was the foundation of a relationship. He was also so unlike Connor. He gave me attention in a way I had never had. He knew how to wine and dine me, to make me feel like I was one of the beautiful Chicago women who existed to drink expensive wines and eat wonderful food and say just the right things to make a man feel lucky he had her. Perhaps he was like my father in that he had been a bachelor for too long, had become too set in his ways, and no one was going to change him. The relationship we had was one that existed at a moment in time when we could have been drawn to each other despite all our differences and all the reasons it wasn't something that would work. Under any other circumstances, it could never have happened.

I saw him once more: in the daylight for the first time on the last day I lived in Chicago. I had put off packing for my move to Florida because I was unwilling to accept that my life was about to change in such a drastic way and that I was going to leave the city where I had created

so many memories. I'd just returned from a trip to the store where I bought more newspapers and packing tape to box up the last of my belongings when I got a text from him.

He was waiting for the bus at the end of my street—the same station where I used to wait to sneak off to him at late hours of the night—and had thought of me. I walked down to meet him. He told me of an opportunity he had to bartend at a new restaurant one of the chefs from his current job was opening, how he was sure it was going to be the big break he had been waiting for, and that he'd go back to school as soon as he was making good money. I told him about grad school and my move to Florida. He liked Orlando—he made a trip with his mom and sister once to go to Disney World after his dad died. He'd never seen the ocean.

I asked him to apologize to Chris for my not choosing law school, sort of joking, but sort of wanting that apology to stand in for the one I felt I should have really given James: an apology for letting him think he was someone I could really end up with. Our attraction was situational, and a big factor of that situation was that he wasn't someone I was supposed to be talking to. In the daylight he looked different. The blues of his eyes that I had once been so curious about were bloodshot, his teeth yellowed from all the cigarettes he was still smoking, his face red and blemished. After I leaned in to hug him, I handed him a pair of gloves he'd given me one winter night when I insisted on taking the train and the bus back to my apartment instead of the cab he wanted to pay for. I'd found them earlier that day tucked behind the armoire I was leaving behind and slipped them into the pocket of my jacket when I got his message. I'd planned on leaving them behind—I'd only been able to wear them the one night because I was worried someone would ask who they belonged to, and I would have no need for them as I packed my car and drove to my new home in Florida, but I'd hoped he'd stay in Chicago and find some use for them that next long, dark winter.

Before the bus arrived, I said goodbye and left him so I could finish packing. It was my last few hours as a resident of this city and I needed to be alone. The impending dusk reminded me of the summer before when I had met James and Chris for dinner and decided to take a cab alone back to the north side rather than spend the night out drinking with the two of them.

“What is your preferred route?” the cab driver had asked that night after I told him my destination.

I hadn’t been used to a man taking care of me financially in the way James had. I had never even allowed myself the luxury of a cab ride, whether it was snowing, raining, unbearably hot, or too late at night for me to be taking public transportation alone, but James had always insisted. Normally I’d have asked the cab driver to take the quickest route back to the north side and I’d pocket the leftover money, but it had still been early and it was one of those nights so temperate that I felt the limitless possibility of summer that one feels when they are very young—even younger than I was—and I had felt a love not for any one person, but for every person and thing in the city.

“Could you take Lake Shore?” I’d asked him.

As the driver turned onto Lake Shore Drive, the street that hugged the shoreline of Lake Michigan, that was the beacon of all of the possibilities of Chicago with its high rise condos and boutiques, I’d rolled the windows in the back seat down and listened to the waves crash the shore beside the highway. The few cars on the road with us had dispersed across four lanes and I’d stuck my hand out the window, feeling the way the wind rippled under it. We passed Navy Pier, the beaches, and the harbor—all of which would be flooded with groups of people as the sun rose the next morning, each of them thinking there was no better place to be in the summer than

Chicago, and me thinking that no one had known a more beautiful Chicago than the one I knew on that long ride home alone in the dark of summer.

## THE BACK COURSE

As a kid, I never learned the name of this place—I knew it as “The Golf Course”—a decaying mini-golf course that was straight down Sheridan: the historic road that stretches from the innards of Chicago to the Illinois-Wisconsin border.

My father’s house sits three miles from the course on the same road. It is the summer before I begin college. The vintage course hasn’t been open for nearly a decade, but some investor saw the potential in the classic set up—the kitschy ornaments and lawn gnomes that decorated the course, the bumpy, uneven walkways with seashells set in cement—and reopened it at the beginning of the summer. The fact that the course had opened right before I was set to move seemed important so when my father called to ask if my brother and I would like to go play it with him, I agreed. This time, I drive the three of us from my father’s house to the course.

The drive is a familiar one—one on which I have been a passenger many times— but the name of the place doesn’t register until I’m the one turning the car into the gravel lot and squaring the car to park between two wooden posts; a slanted pole with a golf ball atop it reads “36 holes. Golf-A-Rama Miniature Golf.” Being the driver changes perspective.

Strings of lights with bulbs where the light looks like a firefly trapped inside the globe hang listlessly between some of the taller posts. I imagine they cast elongated shadows of the statues posed throughout the course, but I’ve never been here at night. Daytime was when my father entertained my brother and me.

My father fumbles with his seat belt as he gets out of the passenger seat—not used to wearing one unless he is asked. In my car, he must. I have recently assumed the responsibility of chauffeur since I revoked his license plates.

The three of us, he, my brother, and I walk to the hut at the entrance to the course where the previous owner had sat inside, watching re-runs of *The Price is Right*, selling soda and bags of chips. Back then he would let the mini golfers choose which color ball they wanted to use. There's now a teenage boy behind the mesh cage of a window. His greasy hair lays a stringy curtain across his forehead and he is wearing a faded black Iron Maiden t-shirt with tiny holes in the shoulder that look like they could have been punctured by a dog's teeth.

The batting cages next door have been closed for as long as I can remember: weeds growing to the canopied roof and through the pockets of the fence, all hopes of a reopening forgotten. But for some reason the mini-golf course fared better. The landscape that surrounds the front and back courses is largely unchanged—the only signs of the years of neglect are the prickly weeds that grow around the posts and in the cracked concrete.

The boy tells us the back course hasn't been re-opened yet and hands us three balls. We step aside to trade colors with one another. The clubs are kept in a rack on the side of the building, rubbery black tape covering the handles of the putters in spots where the grip has been picked away. We select the tallest putters at the stand and walk to the first hole: a straightaway next to a water wheel and koi pond.

My father came alive during the divorce. We would go to the golf course on Sundays (Saturday was our dad's weekend-night with us, getting us after five o'clock mass until five p.m. on Sundays). Every weekend we were doing something: driving to Wisconsin to pick apples and dine on all-you-can-eat apple crisp, bowling to earn ten cents for each pin we knocked down, perusing the classifieds for estate sales where he searched for antiques and I selected tattered paperbacks, cassettes of classical music, and costumes for the plays I wrote.

One time when my brother was elsewhere for the night my father took me to the outlet mall off the highway. I had earned some allowance money so I paid for dinner in the food court and he bought me as many things from the clearance bin at my favorite store that I could fit into a basket, which consisted of barrettes and clip-in hair extensions. He liked me best when he could forget I was a child. During dinner, we talked of the events that led to the Civil War and how my name would have been Shiloh or Antietam if he had his way. The next morning before we picked my brother up from his friend's house, I helped my dad grade term papers like I often did.

He marked up the blue books with a red pen that bled pools through the lined pages and I read his comments when he was finished before we decided on a grade. He then handed the graded books to me so I could arrange them in descending order across the floor of our library. We laughed at how many people had earned zeroes. I never thought it was fair that so many of the students did not earn a single point for the pages of research they had written for his criminal justice courses—at least they had tried. But I wanted my father to see me as his equal so we ridiculed his students together. I dreamed of the day when I would prove myself competent of his intelligence. I spent many days at his house reading up on the history of criminal justice in the United States from the books he kept on our many shelves—the spines of the books fell limp as I slid them out of their spaces.

Most often we ended up at the golf course. Our father wasn't the sort to purposely let kids win. He made everything a competition: grades, bowling scores, the number of ground balls we could field at the park down the block from his house. If the game was close, my brother started playing "hockey": a technique in which he used the putter to glide the ball against Astroturf until it found its way into the hole, counting the entire maneuver as one stroke.

Though he was only in first grade, he was already the athlete of the family; he couldn't bear to be bad at a sport, even if it was just miniature golf.

As a fourth grader who had mastered the addition and multiplication units on the first try, I was the scorekeeper. When my brother reported a score of one or two for holes that he played hockey on, I threw my club down in protest, metal clanking hard against concrete, and ran off to the edge of the course to cry. If we didn't let him get his way, he hurled his club at the nearest statue before kicking the wooden barriers that guided the paths of the course. My father always stood at the beginning of the next hole, guiding his ball with the putter until it was centered perfectly at the edge of the green for his shot. He watched us pouting along the edges of the course and laughed through his teeth, the air coming out through his nose. It was the same noise he made when he was telling us why he thought my mother left him: his belief that there had been someone else. Though he was laughing, the sound was harsh, and it made me feel even younger than I was—let me know that I was acting ridiculous. I always trudged back to him, picking up my club on the way. He joked that we would never get through a game of golf without a meltdown.

It was true. The clusters of other players snuck glances at my brother and me, our tear-streaked faces. My father was a statue ahead of us, indifferent to our frustrations.

The disagreements always worked themselves out by the end of the match when I climbed into the car and tallied up scores. It was always a close game: everyone as lucky as everyone else. We went out for BLTs and lemon-lime slushes, the winner getting a sundae as well. Then it was five o'clock. Our mom waited in the driveway for us, never walking to the door. And another weekend of living out of a duffel bag was behind us.



Now we play the course in relative silence, save my dad's occasional, animated remarks—no sign of the emotional fits we used to display in this arena.

“Good job, Masher!”

“Whoa, Conner man. Look at that stroke.”

My brother and I offer close-lipped smiles in response, years of practiced silence between us.

The early August sun is unforgiving. Only one hole on the front course provides refuge: a Shinto shrine with a stagnant pool of water beneath its bridge. It is on the far north side of the course and runs parallel to a tall wooden fence. On the other side is the cage of shrubbery where families used to spend time at the batting cages.

When we first learned that the golf course would be closing I imagined its maintenance would go by the wayside as well. So many things in that town had: the strip mall on Washington, then the arcade next door to it, the theater downtown where my dad had seen Johnny Cash from the second row, the venue across the street where Spanish sopranos sang on weekends and amateur boxers fought on stage after hours. I'm amazed by how little the course has changed, how it resisted the desolation that had wrought so much of the rest of the city.

A statue of a horse on its hind legs leaning against a fence, chips of white paint peeling off its body like an exoskeleton that took years to molt away. The hole where we had to putt up a ramp, hitting the ball with enough speed to jump the gap to enter a barn. The inside of the barn was a cavern, pitch black with holes tunneled through the sides, but the loft of the barn had a window, a tiny overhead light, and miniature animals resting in harmony amongst the artificial hay. I went up on tiptoes each time we played this hole and peered in to the unchanging scene.

I want to look into the barn again and I easily could, glancing sidelong as I walk to retrieve my ball from the other side, but I don't. I want to think the miniature scene, one that could never occur in nature—a variety of farm animals that wouldn't peacefully inhabit the loft of a barn together—has persisted through the seasons and the absence of people, save the groups of teenagers looking for a secluded place to stow their car and sip from water bottles of smuggled whiskey. But more than that I worry my father may catch me and try to recall some memory from this spot on the course. I imagine peeking into the window barely long enough to discern the sun-bleached bodies of the figurines atop wiry hay before he would interject a refurbished memory of this place.

“Hey, Mash,” he might say, “remember that time you got upset because you thought that the other animals were going to hurt the deer? You were always so sensitive about them. You'd cry every time we drove up to Wisconsin and you saw the dead deer hanging off the back of the trucks up there. It got so bad I'd have to tell you to lay down in the backseat when we passed one so you wouldn't see it. I told you that the deer in the barn was safe because all the other animals loved him best.”

He was right; I had always gotten upset by the images of hunted deer, their antlers tossed in the bed of a pickup truck, sometimes filling garbage bags to the brim. Certainly there were times that he and I had looked into the barn together, taking turns placing our faces up to the latticed window and talking about the different animals in there, but the belief that the scene remains unchanged is my own. So much has changed: the buildings in my hometown, my relationship with my father. I want to think that there is something, however miniscule, from my childhood that could stay the same. I don't look not only because I'm not sure what will happen

if I peek in and don't find the animals there, but because I can't let my father reconstruct the memories I have here to create an idealistic version of himself.

My father has always been gifted with memory, never saving a single number to his cellphone's contact list because he could remember numbers as far back as that of his childhood home, but I've recently learned his tendency to embellish stories of our childhood, especially as my brother and I have stopped spending time with him. He makes up weekend trips we take to Lake Geneva together, or private visits to Six Flags on days when the park is closed to the public. In high school I started taking creative writing classes. He tells his family a story about a paper in which I wrote about my biggest hero and chose him; it's not one I'll ever write.

He'll stay up late drinking from the cup he keeps on the floor next to him in the living room and then dial his brother who lives on the west coast, telling him fairytale stories of our youth. My uncle doesn't say much, but my dad talks anyway, hanging up when he's convinced himself of the success of his children's childhoods. I'm not sure what sort of imagined happiness he can construct at this course, especially since we have spent much of the last few years apart—he alone with his imagination, his need to present himself as the perfect father.

I'm not moving far; the university on the north side of Chicago is only about forty miles from the suburb I call home, but I know my father won't visit, and I know I wouldn't allow him to even if he would. His motion to repeal child support for me arrived on the day I graduated high school. He didn't make it to the graduation ceremony.

Our relationship since the motion to repeal child support and modify the initial agreement that he would pay for half of my college expenses arrived in the mail had been nonexistent and would only get more sporadic as his alcoholism worsens. Still I chose to go on this outing

because it carried with it a few real, good memories with my father. A mini golf course: the sort of place where a divorced father of two could pretend like he hadn't lost everything.

A month later he will take the train to Chicago on the day I move into the dorms, arriving hours early and meeting my roommate and her family before I have. I will have the familiar feelings of fear and shame, wondering how many misremembered memories he has shared, how much I will have to explain on his behalf. He will try to move my things in—selecting a single pillow from the piles of my belongings before enlisting the help of one of the maintenance men who roll makeshift carts, dollies with walls made of cardboard boxes duct-taped together. The man will load my belongings quickly, six floors of new students and their parents to assist. He will toss a box labeled “books” atop the pile, shattering a graduation gift from my friends. My stepdad will collect the fragments after listening to my complaints all afternoon, gluing the gift back together piece-by-piece, the cracked part made whole again, the blemishes only obvious due to the yellow of the wood glue.

But that won't stop me from being angry with my father on that day.

We're at one of my favorite holes on the course when he tells us a story that I've heard in every voicemail he left me that summer.

“Did you guys hear how Mimi and Papa Homer sent me the Persian rug they had in their living room? Paid to have it shipped here and I wasn't sure it was going to fit in the dining room, but it does. Not even a centimeter to spare. It looks great.”

His elderly mother and stepdad had recently moved into assisted living and sent some of the items from their home to their children. A week after the rug arrived he was on the phone with his brother who took the opportunity to let my father know that their parents' health was

deteriorating. My father began telling him about the rug in the dining room, not even acknowledging what my uncle told him.

I'm standing on the square platform of the hole next to a statue of a kangaroo with a newborn tucked in her pouch. I look down on him squaring himself at the starting point. Neither my brother nor I say anything. His hands tremble just a bit—the bones and veins of them jut out like the seashells melded into the cracked blacktop. My father's shoulders drop as he putts. He follows the ball with his eyes—the blood vessels around them have burst so his face is flushed, but his eyes remain an icy blue. He resumes his description of the rug when the ball has come to a stop.

My mom will banish my father from my dormitory for the rest of moving day that August, sending him and my brother on foolproof missions to get more hangers and cleaning supplies. After she has left, though, he and I will walk the long city block to the grocery store on the perimeter of campus. We will each get a bowl of soup and eat it in the store's café.

When I was younger I would play a game where I ran away from my father in the grocery store. I waited until he was reading the recipe from one of the pages he had bookmarked in his *Bon Appetit* magazine before dashing away from him and hiding somewhere in the store. I usually chose the frozen food aisles, opening the heavy glass doors and placing my head in the cooler, but sometimes I just wandered around. I think I wanted to know if he cared enough to look for me, how long it would take him to notice I was missing. We became friends with one of the employees because she always had to find me. She'd take my hand and lead me back to my father who was usually at the butcher counter, but not before stopping by the display where shoppers weighed out bags of candy and letting me choose a piece or two.

I liked walking through the store with her; I felt important knowing someone who worked there, who knew their way around the store better than me, but I always wished she would leave me for my father to find. It didn't seem right that he had some stranger's help in keeping track of me. When she brought me back to him he'd look up from his magazine and the golden-rimmed glasses with lenses that often popped out, and shake his head at me. He laughed and rubbed the top of my head before thanking the woman who sought me out in the store at least once a week.

The soup is a tradition of ours long forgotten—one that dates back to when I was an only child. Back then we would drive to the grocery store after he had picked me up from preschool, get soup, and take it out to the car where we would eat in the parking lot, watching people shuffle to their cars with full shopping carts. Sometimes he would leave me in the car alone, though I'm not sure where he would go. One of these times, one of my mom's coworkers found me sitting in the back seat of my father's Toyota Corolla, a steaming container of split pea soup resting between my legs, no coat in sight. He peered in at me through the frosted windows. I stared out the front windshield, hoping the February snowfall was enough to keep me hidden. He must have told my mom what he had seen when he returned to work that day because I listened to my parents fight about it in the kitchen after dinner that night. I worried our soup dates would end, desperately wanting the few hours a week I spent doing anything with my father.

Finally we arrive at the last hole of the course. It always struck me as the laziest hole because it was just a hill that plateaued off to metal poles spaced equally apart with different numbers, zero through three, painted between the slots. Our games were always close so the final hole was usually the deciding factor and surprisingly tougher than it looked. My brother

and I finish the game, eager to get back to the lives we have made in our father's absence. My dad takes his turn and hits the post between zero and two, sending the ball back down the slope to him. He tries again and the same thing happens. Finally he sinks it into a three slot for a final par of five.

I think he must be playing easy. I haven't been as vigilant about keeping score, but I know the game is close. Of all the times my brother and I could have used a break, would have loved for him to let us win, I wonder why he chooses now.

"We used to come here all the time when these guys were little. Didn't we, kiddos?" he tells the boy as we are returning our golf balls.

"I don't know much about the course, but you guys can take a look at the back if you want," the boy says.

We follow him to the back course, sidestepping piles of shingles and wood blocks. A man stands under a lean-to at one of the holes and cuts into something with a chainsaw. He pauses to wave to us.

"It looks the same as it used to. Why haven't you guys reopened it?" I ask the boy.

He tells us they're going to turn the back into a haunted course for Halloween so they're in the process of building taller fences to obscure the view. He seems excited about this project, telling us how he's going to dress up and jump out at people with a chainsaw at the hole with a tiger trapped in a big cage. I want to tell him that it's not going to happen, that the idea for the haunted course is just a high hope for something long gone and that the course should be left as it is without adding monsters and zombies and power tools, but I just thank him for letting us see the course as I remember it.

The winter after I begin college I will leave the city for a weekend to see my father off to rehab. While I am home, I will drive past The Golf Course. The February snow will have covered most of the course, but I will see a signboard that has been rolled out to the road. It will say that the course is closed for good, as of the first weekend that October. I will think about the plans for the haunted back course and the boy's excitement.

"You should make a trip back for Halloween so we can play the back course and go on one of those ghost walks you always liked," my dad says as I turn into his driveway to drop him off after our game of golf, but I know it will never happen.



## TEN LIES ON A STREET IN NASHVILLE

*I. I need to get in touch with my ex-boyfriend because he's caring for my cats back at my apartment in Orlando and I'm suddenly very worried about them.*

No. It has nothing to do with the fact that he's recently broken up with you and blocked your number because you couldn't stop asking him what was wrong with you, pleading with him to tell you what was so bad about you that he couldn't stay in a relationship with you for more than a few months.

*Yes, just the cats. If you could just let him know I was making sure he's still taking care of them, and that I'm worried because he's left me no way to get in touch with him, you tell your brother's girlfriend—one of the only people you can call because the time difference from where Nashville to Arizona ensures she will be awake and because you don't know her well enough to feel any shame about using her as a ploy to get him to contact you because, yes, you are that desperate to hear from him.*

She'll call him, leave a voicemail—unsure how to explain her relationship to you or how to convey your request. He'll call her back after waking in the middle of the night to a message from an unknown number. They'll smooth it over. Yes, the cats are fine, she'll tell you. He'll be back over to feed them when he gets off work tomorrow.

*Did you really think I would neglect your fucking cats? he'll say to you when he unblocks your number an hour later, in bed and unable to sleep because he is scared of you and what you might do and how he might feel responsible for it.*

*II. I would've been okay had those terrible old men in the bar just left me alone.*

It is all very friendly at first—they make room at their table for you and your two friends who have traveled to Nashville for Spring Break. You are in a popular country bar on Broadway Street. A band with an endless rotation of female singers in cowboy boots who take turns pretending to be Carrie Underwood or Miranda Lambert or Dolly Parton while the others drink along the ledge of a bar beside the tiny stage play. Your hands are full: a drink and a shot in each, and you have trouble pushing your way through the crowd. The men see the three of you, wave you over. Happy to have a place to set your drinks down, you order another round from the waitress who passes. The men at the table start to buy shots for everyone. One of the men in the band sings a Brooks & Dunn cover. You sway to the music a little bit, sipping a whiskey-Sprite through a straw the whole time. Then, it is there—it has been sneaking up on you all vacation. Because that's what grief is: crying in a country bar with two of your closest friends to one of your favorite songs when you think you are almost having a good time. Your throat tightens, your vision fogs, you bite your lip trying to keep the tears from winding their way down your face and neck. But it isn't enough.

*Hey, why's she crying?* one of the men says, elbowing your friends who are still singing along to the music.

You bite your lip harder, look straight ahead, maybe sing a word or two. *Nothing to see here.*

*No, she's really crying. Hey girl, why you so sad? Life can't be that hard,* he says.

*I'm not.*

*You are. What's wrong little girl?* he says and pushes his way past his buddies toward you. He puts an arm on your shoulder.

*Don't fucking touch me*, you say and shove him off, make your way to the bathroom, think twice about it, turn back.

The men at the table are really making fun of you now. Hairy hands ball into fists, lips flip in an exaggerated pout, they mime the act of crying. Your friends laugh along, reaching for shots across the table as they do.

*You know, it's really fucking pathetic that you have a friend in pain and you're all laughing about it with these men making fun of a young girl just so you can get drunk*, you say and then push through the crowded room to listen to the band. When you calm down and are ready to try to have fun again you return to the room with the men and the table, but your friends were nowhere to be found.

**III.** *Yes, I'm fine. No, I don't need anyone's help. Yes, I need you all to please leave me alone. Go. Really.*

You're sitting against the side of a building around the corner from the bar you left. It's something governmental. Post office, maybe. The street slopes and from your vantage point on the ground it looks like you are at the bottom of a very big hill. You have no interest in climbing to the top.

You're crying—too far past consolation to care about the audience—and wiping your tears and snot onto the sheer black train of your dress, which has pooled around you on the sidewalk. It's nearing last call and as people tumble out of the bars, everyone having just had the absolute best night of their lives, some of them catch sight of you and stop. They want to know if you are okay, if they can help. They want to know why you are so upset and they want to tell you that this man, *whoever the fuck he is*, is not worth your tears. They don't know anything about you. Drunk girls are very helpful in this way. They have the desire to save everyone—to become the

Good Samaritan and motivational speaker and leader of the Girl Power movement all in one vodka-inspired diatribe. Homeless men also stop to try and comfort you, though perhaps for different reasons.

You don't want any of their help.

*IV. I can sit on this street forever.*

Heartache can reach a point when even the most rational of people can act completely crazy, which is of course what you are doing. In this moment you're sobbing so hard that you gag. You're cursing at people you don't know who walk past you with concern. You exist outside the realm of responsibility and consequence. You will sit here through the night as the temperature drops to the twenties. You will be buried in snow and even then you will not move. You will watch the sun rise, curse its beauty, and when the cops come to tell you that you can't be sitting there, that they'll have to take you in if you don't move, you'll say *guess what? I don't fucking care.*

*V. My friends abandoned me in the middle of downtown in a city that I have never visited.*

Now that you have managed to wake your ex-boyfriend up and opened the channel of communication once more, you decide to test how much he really cares about you, which you guess is not very much. You hope he will prove you wrong.

You call him. Normally you have to think about something sad in order to give your voice that proper tone of urgency and despair, but these tears are genuine. You're not sure what you're going to say. He picks up.

*My friends left me. I got upset again and they told me they were sick of it, that I was ruining their vacation, and I turned around and they were gone. All the bars are about to close and our hotel is so far away I don't know what I'll do.*

Your friends warned you a couple times that your bursts of sadness were ruining the fun of the girls trip, that they'd appreciate if you could contain them until there was a more suitable time to talk through the heartache you were feeling, but you had been containing the feelings in the three months you sat alone in your one bedroom apartment, too sad to do anything but lay on the ground and wish he would call you—too far away from any friends or family for any real consolation. You'd built your life around a man—something you'd promised yourself before you moved that you would never do again, yet there you were, one thousand miles away from home and no ties to anyone except this man who'd decided he wanted nothing to do with you. The first couple nights in Nashville, your friends took trips to the liquor store together while you got ready in the hotel room. They headed down to the lobby together to video chat with their boyfriends back home in Illinois and wove their way to the front of the crowd to listen to the bands at the bars while you stayed back and glanced down at your phone for messages you wouldn't receive. Still, you had been the one who walked away from them.

Your ex-boyfriend is very concerned, or at least doing a very good job at pretending he is. You want him to tell you that he loves you and he's so sorry this all has happened and he can't wait to see you when you get back to Orlando and, in fact, you should cut your trip short right now and come back to him because he misses you and you deserve better friends than the ones you're with. Instead he calls the friend you're traveling with, explains that you are lost and would like to meet back up with them but aren't sure where they are. She sends him a message with the name of the new bar they are at. He forwards it to you. *Problem solved*, he says, and goes back to sleep.

**VI.** *This is completely the fault of my friends.*

This has nothing to do with you. You are upset and have every right to be. You've just been through the hardest break up you've ever had, which is saying a lot, because you've had many, and you've done it across the country from your support system. It isn't too much to expect that your friends would want to listen to you talk about all the horrible things that have happened and to remind you why you deserve to be treated better. The fact that you can't keep yourself from crying every time you go out is solely due to the fact that they haven't allowed you to talk through your feelings.

This has nothing to do with him. Yes, he broke up with you, but could you blame him? You hadn't exactly given him any reasons to want to stick around since he left. Still, he really cared. He was the one on the phone with you in the middle of the night when your friends were at the bar, drinking and stealing cowboy hats from the bouncers. They don't care about you and they are the ones who are ruining this vacation.

***VII. I'm going to kill myself.***

With your ex-boyfriend asleep once more, you have to find a way to grab his attention. You decide that you're going to kill yourself. You've made this promise to him many times in the past few months—sometimes you have been so sure it was actually going to happen, other times you say it because nothing else conveys the pain and sickness in your chest quite like the desire to die. You have dreams of it. This time you can see it happening: running into the middle of the street to be hit by a car, arranging your money in a way that someone will try to rob you and you'll call them something horrible, hope they have a knife or a gun, beg them to do what you can't.

It is now three, four in the morning. He is exhausted. He doesn't believe you are really going to do it. But you will, you swear you will. *Do you really want to take that fucking risk?*

you ask him between sobs that leave you gasping on the inhales. He tells you that he cannot understand what you are saying, but *Jesus Christ it's late* and he needs to get to sleep.

*This is on you, you tell him, you'll never hear from me again.*

**VIII.** *I'm not going to kill myself.*

He has reached out to your friend again, told her that she needs to find you because you're a threat to yourself and he can't stay up all night talking you off a ledge that you've been on for months. Your friend, new to drinking and very drunk now, is too far gone and too invested in the bouncer at the bar to entertain your games. You're not sure there's anyone who would still put up with your games at this point.

She slams a shot of Fireball, rolls the shot glass across the bar to the bartender, digs her phone out of the back pocket of high-waisted denim shorts. She texts your mother—always a light sleeper—and tells her that you're going to kill yourself.

You field a call from your mother. She sounds like you: desperate, pleading. You tell her you won't hurt yourself, that you'll be okay. You're just going to sleep on the street tonight and whatever happens, happens, you tell her, that she shouldn't worry but that your phone is going to die and you'll talk to her when you can.

**IX.** *I can pretend like nothing has happened.*

It's all going to be okay. You resolve to pull yourself together, wipe the filmy snot from the train of your dress, press cold fingers to the puffy skin under your eyes. You'll get a drink at the bar by yourself since your buzz has faded, meet a guy and start chatting him up. A man can always make it better, at least for a little while. You'll go find your friends. You'll cling to the arm of this man, introduce him to them, reference a conversation you and he had at the previous bar. Laugh a little. You'll take shots together until last call and you'll all pile into a cab back to

the hotel. *Sorry I was so crazy earlier*, you'll say between shared stories of the night, *just needed a little time to myself*. Easy as that.

You put your shoes back on, gather the belongings of your purse that are scattered about the sidewalk, tuck your hair behind your ears, begin the downhill walk to the long stretch of bars. You catch sight of your reflection.

You return to your spot on the sidewalk and begin crying all over again.

*X. I am okay with the way I spent a night on a street in Nashville.*

Closing time. You know because clusters of people leave the bars in an exodus, some of them still chugging drinks they snuck outside. You can't bear the thought of all these people stopping to stare at you or talk to you so you gather your things, circle around the block, and make your way past the bars just as the street takes on the eerie, empty quality in the few hours between bar close and the beginning of the workday. It's snowing now and the windows frost over quickly without the bodies in the bar to keep the places warm. You can see your friends in one of the bars. They're the last patrons. They turn each other in circles, dance to the echoes of songs played hours before. They wait for their new bouncer boyfriends to finish locking up, delayed by the fact that the girls keep grabbing them by their belt buckles or the chinstraps of their cowboy hats to dance. Finally they finish and the four of them couple off and push out into the deserted street. You're standing just to the right of the door. You lift your hand to wave, but they are scanning the street for a cab and they look straight past you as if you're already a ghost.



## MEN I'VE THOUGHT I LOVED

I. He is your first boyfriend, and doesn't that mean you have to love him, at least in some small way? You do. You meet Kirk in the spring of your freshman year of high school. He is a year older and sits across from you in your marketing class. He adds you on MySpace and asks for your number the day after classes let out for summer. You have your first date three days later.

Kirk has a car and drives you and your friends around. He has dirty blonde hair cut into a shag that he sweeps across his forehead. He plays guitar in a band. He tries to teach you to play guitar. You spend hours a day in his basement—a movie, any movie, playing on the giant projector—exploring these new feelings of your lips fitting to someone else's, your hands touching his arms, shoulders, chest. Your dad takes the two of you to a Milwaukee Brewers game and Kirk buys a bag of peanuts, not to eat, but to pretend the misshapen bag is a child the two of you have together. He names him Henry and you keep him in the drawer of the coffee table in his basement for months.

You eat dinner with his family at six-thirty each weeknight. Kirk's mother brings a plate of apples to him exactly ten minutes before dinner and you take turns feeding the slices to each other, licking the juice off your hands after. His parents ask you about your day, your interests, your goals. Their many diplomas hang in the office off the dining room where you eat dinner. When you are at your house, you eat fast food around the television when your mother, exhausted from working to singlehandedly provide for two children, finally returns home after shuttling your brother around.

Perhaps it is this desire for a family, for a future of certainty that causes you to continue to see Kirk after the rape. You are fifteen, not yet ready to have sex—perfectly content with the

innocent exploration of his lips and the feeling of his body against yours over clothes—but he is insistent, has tunnel vision, needs you in a way that you do not yet need him. So he takes you, and you tell him no, and he continues anyway, and you get mad and tell your mother and that's it. You aren't allowed to see him anymore.

But then he is desperate. He sends you emails at all hours of the day. He is unable to sleep. He swears that he loves you and that your love is unlike any love anyone has ever known and if you can just join together and overcome this bump in the road, everyone will understand that they were wrong to keep you apart. His words are so self-assured. You believe him. You are writing a great love story. The two of you will end up together and have the life and love you always wanted. But, you are teenagers, and absence does not make the heart grow fonder when your parents are hell-bent on keeping you apart. The exhaustion of sneaking around, living two lives, wears on you both.

**II.** He has a girlfriend when you first meet him, but you don't know that. What you know is that Tyler has skin as pale as yours, freckles clustered across the bridge of his nose, and that he used to have shaggy black hair like the lead singer of your favorite band, but that it is now cropped close to his scalp: a thin blanket of orange fuzz. You meet Tyler at a concert you are hosting in your friend's basement. His girlfriend is there you later learn, but recently out of rehab she spends her time chain smoking with the band guys' girlfriends in the cul-de-sac. He helps you take the five-dollar admission money from anyone who wanders down the basement stairs, even the scene girls with big, teased black hair, lip piercings, and scowls that dare you to ask them to pay.

You begin dating a month later and it's nice to date someone you don't have to lie to everyone around you about seeing like you do with Kirk. Tyler lets you drive his car before you

get your license and he takes you and your friends to local shows, which aren't really local because they're more than an hour away, and he never once complains about the gas money or the time like your ex-boyfriend did. The two of you could drive around forever—trace the cornfield-lined roads between your homes over and over until the wheels of his Pontiac Sunfire wear their own path into the dust—and listen to the music from the bands you both love and feel such a lightness that your shy, unsure self could almost sing all the words aloud.

He buys you a silver ring studded with little diamonds for your first Christmas together and when you ask him if it means that he wants to marry you, he purses his lips and nods his head yes.

Early in the relationship, on a night like so many nights when you sat in a corner of your room, biting your lip in wait for the perfect response to everything he says, when the hours spent on the phone together stretched long and without consequence, he offers you a warning.

“You shouldn't be with someone like me. I'm not good for you.”

And if you are older, if you could have the perspective on this relationship that will not come for more than half a decade, you may have heeded his prediction. But, you are sixteen and it all sounds perfectly melodramatic and exactly how you think love should be, so you stay.

**III.** You tell him that you love him, and you know it's too soon, and that you never will, but you say it anyway, and you continue to say it until you break up a month later because it hurts less to pretend that you can move on from one boyfriend who you loved intensely and fall into love with another in a matter of weeks.

Mike is a cashier at the grocery store where you work during your junior year of high school. The two of you hide cellphones in the pockets of your cashier vests and send each other texts from a few registers away. When the managers at customer service are busy, you pick up

the register phones, dial the number of one another's register, shyly whisper '*I love you,*' turn your head to smile at the other person, snap the phone back on the receiver when a customer begins unloading groceries onto your belt.

He races cars. His is an orange Dodge Neon, and he picks you up in it every Friday, sliding around the ice on the steep, sloping driveway of your mother's house. He is too shy to meet your family, so if you are not ready when he arrives, he sits in the driveway and breathes clouds into winter nights. You hang out at the local McDonalds—the one that plays old rock and roll and has booths shaped liked jukeboxes— but you never go inside. He stands in the parking lot and talks mods with the other guys who have souped-up cars like his. You sit inside the car.

He leaves the heat on for you, but it quickly turns the car into a sauna and in your winter coat, you can't breathe. At seventeen you know the car is the great pride of his life and you're too scared to touch any buttons so you sit there and text your ex-boyfriend who you blame for not wanting to date you anymore and for making you spend your weekend nights growing claustrophobic in Mike's car.

One night you sneak out to see Tyler. Your mom catches you and demands you return home. When you get home, you get into a screaming match and she takes your car keys. You leave again, this time on foot, and call Mike—your stand-in boyfriend. He lives nearby and knows exactly where you are hiding out in the industrial park near your house. He picks you up in the Neon, drives you to his sister's new house where he tells you that you can stay as long as you'd like—his family is your family.

When your ex-boyfriend decides he wants you back, as he will periodically do for the next four years of your life, it comes with a stipulation. He doesn't want you back if there has been another man in your life since he left. You call this boy and cry. Your tears are a request.

You want him to say that the two of you were coworkers and nothing more—to say that no thought of like or love passed between you two. He must hurry and agree, you tell him, because you have given your ex-boyfriend his phone number and he will be calling to confirm these facts with him in a matter of minutes. You want him to lie for you. And he does.

**IV.** You cannot date him, so you claim him as your best friend. He lives across the hallway from you in the dorms where you live during your first year of college. You are still sort-of-on with your on-and-off high school boyfriend, but in this new boy you see the promise of something easier, more genuine. When your relationship ends for good in January of your freshman year, you know you must wait so Connor doesn't see himself as the rebound. No, the rebound is Connor's roommate, who you sleep with the weekend after Tyler ends your relationship at your nineteenth birthday party, and you kick Connor's roommate out of your room and back across the hall as soon as the two of you finish having sex.

You begin dating another man in the dorms before Connor confesses the feelings you know he has for you. The other man is nice enough—an accounting student who asked a mutual friend to set the two of you up—but he gets too drunk and remembers maybe half of the conversations you have in the month you date. One night you are at a party with the accountant. He drinks from a bottle of Captain Morgan that he keeps in a backpack all night. Another of Connor's roommates is at this party and you decide that you are going to tell Connor how you feel about him, but first, you need to know how the news will be received.

You walk to his roommate, pull out your phone, announce that you're going to confess your feelings to Connor. His roommate tells you not to, that you are both seeing other people, that you get along so well as friends. You walk back to the other side of the party, type a

message to Connor, glance back at his roommate to let him know you have disregarded his opinion, give him a thumbs up. He shakes his head.

That night the two of you return to the dorms and you follow Connor's roommate to their bedroom where you climb into Connor's bed and wait for him to return home. You share your first kiss over the smell and taste of malt liquor and cigarettes and the sound of an evangelical sermon on TV. You will be the one to initiate much of your relationship: the decision to become a couple, the first 'I love you,' the plan for a future, and then the idea to break-up when his insistence that you'll find someone to replace him becomes so frustrating that you finally do.

V. You meet at a bar, which is where you're meeting pretty much everyone these days. But this one is different, and not like the way you hope every guy is different, but really different. He's a writer like you: shy and dark-haired and sweet.

"I'm about to do the most important thing I've done all night," Milan says, and when you lean in and ask him to repeat himself, he cuts you off and kisses your cheek.

When he excuses himself to use the bathroom, he leaves you in a bar where the staff has watched you kiss a handful of boys a night since you were old enough to drink. You reach for your phone and send a group message to your friends that you think you've found the man you're supposed to marry. You're sure of it.

Milan drives you the block-and-a-half home that night. You make out in his car, which is double-parked on the narrow Chicago street tucked under the el tracks for hours until a cop car rolls by—slow night—and asks you to stop loitering.

You feel like you're in high school again: all giddiness and innocence and hope. And it's those feelings and the feeling of your lips, dry and plump from too much kissing, that cause you to loiter for months when he leaves for a trip to Los Angeles, which turns into a move to Los

Angeles, only for him to return to Chicago and the slate-gray building where you live the week before you move across the country yourself, headed in another direction entirely: Florida.

Milan tells you he sold a movie script during his first week in Los Angeles, that he was writing for a popular television show, that he pitched another television show that was being considered for network pick-up, that he acted as an extra in several shows that you watch, that he was going back to school for his Masters in screenwriting, that he bought a condo in Los Angeles, and now one in Chicago, too. On your last day in Chicago, you wake in his condo—all granite countertops, stainless steel fixtures, hardwood floors. You see a class schedule for community college posted on his bulletin board, and then his name on top of it. There is no college diploma, though there is a wall of framed memorabilia. There is no grad school schedule. No acceptance letters. You say nothing. You kiss him and cry when he drops you in front of the apartment where you stayed outside kissing so many hours, and then you drive south until you nearly can't anymore—ending in Orlando, your lips still swollen from his.

**VI.** You knew he was a womanizer—you'd watch him flirt and tease and toy with the girls in the restaurant where the two of you worked, despite his high school girlfriend visiting every shift and sitting over a basket of chili cheese fries, picking at them with a fork until they were cold and fossilized in a blanket of cheese. Still it had been years since you'd worked together. Earl could have grown up, though you assumed the girlfriend was still around and clinging to the forged love between herself and the man she first had sex with: the sort of love you had already learned was often disingenuous, never long-lasting. You begin to see Earl anyway.

You buy tickets for the two of you to attend the Cubs home opener. You love baseball even if it means having to watch the Cubs: a team you have never been a fan of, but one he is crazy about. The game is cancelled due to snow and you're upset; baseball season always brings

the promise of good weather, new beginnings, and possibilities in Chicago. You pout in the living room of your three-flat apartment, watching balls of hail pelt the window and balcony outside; it's not supposed to snow in April. Earl rides his bike all the way to you from the far West side, forces you into a nice dress, out of the house. You walk the few blocks to the Southport Corridor. It is the street where you first met, and the street where you both work in other restaurants now: restaurants that are kitty-corner to each other at the intersection three blocks west of Wrigley Field. You duck into a dark, Cuban bar. It's one you have both passed many times but that neither of you have ever visited. You warm yourselves with mojitos and shots of tequila. You scoot your bar stools closer and closer until you are the only ones in the restaurant and your hand rests on his knee. You talk about your families and your futures, not quite acknowledging the growing hope that you'll find a way to fit into each other's somehow.

“See, this is what love is like: taking a bad situation and making it into something good,” you say and Earl agrees.

A soft, acoustic cover of a song called “Good Life” plays through the speakers. The whistling melody soothes you like a lullaby, like the sound of the man beside you speaking Spanish quiet enough so that only you hear.

Above the bar, the big blades of fans turn slowly. They look like they are made of sturdy parchment pulled taut over a bamboo frame, like they would belong on the wrap-around porch of a hacienda in a country you've never been to, in the country where this man is from. You decide that you like them.

Months later, you watch the blades of the ceiling fan in your room turn rapidly. This is your routine: you have sex once, maybe twice, you wait for him to fall asleep, you reach over his sturdy, tanned body, and grab his phone. He is still seeing his high school girlfriend, still



planning to marry her and have as many babies as she can bear, telling her the same things he tells you, and yet, you can't stop yourself from seeing him. You wonder if you will always let men get away with as many things as you have let this man.

**VII.** You meet when you are both very drunk on your first night out in the city where you have just moved. The humidity of Florida, the cigarette smoke, and the open-air bars seem to amplify the drunkenness you learned to negotiate back in your hometown of Chicago. You are drunk to the point where you fall down more times than you can count on the walk back to David's apartment.

You can't seem to gain control of your legs no matter how badly you want to and once you crumple under what you vaguely remember to be a parking garage. You apologize to him and cry and realize that nothing—not grad school, not moving cross-country, not making the decision not to fall for someone so quickly like you always do—allows you to escape yourself. Over and over David tells you that it's okay, though he will tease you about it later, and with his guidance, you make it back to his place on the other side of downtown. He takes you to the rooftop pool. This is his “move” as you will learn in the months after you break up when he will call you long after the bars have closed and he has found no one to fill your void, your space in his bed, your ability to reassure him that he is the confident, successful man he pretends to be.

But that first night you look out onto your new city, too drunk to commit the image to memory, and in the morning you wake up alone in his bed, your knee busted open and the freshness of the cut stuck to the sheets twisted around your legs. You are certain you are in the guest bedroom of a man's parents' house. You get up, turn circles, imagine ways to play the situation off, to exit gracefully despite the fact that you have no idea where your shorts are. He wakes up on the couch of his living room, sure that he said something to offend you: something

he's been known to do with women he brings home. He dreads going into his room to ask you what he said. He realizes he does not know your name but that he has your wallet beside him and he sneaks a peek at the name on the driver's license, and probably takes a look at the picture on the ID, too—just to be sure. He opens the door, crawls into bed with you, holds you there like you have known each other for years, despite the fact that morning is the first time you remember seeing each other's face.

Neither of you know what attracted you to the other that first night, how you started talking at the bar, but you will spend the next few months trying to figure it out. You never quite do.

**VIII.** You want him to be yours so you make it happen. You're not sure where the confidence comes from. In the months after the man you fell for during your first semester of graduate school breaks up with you, you spend days in your one-bedroom apartment crying and feeling certain that no one has ever felt quite as lonely as you. You don't have a job and your classes only meet twice a week so there are days you don't have to shower, dress, cook—days when you don't speak to anyone besides maybe your cats if you realize you haven't talked all day and want to test your voice.

One night, another one alone, you are drinking wine and remember the tiny Irish pub in the strip mall next to a funeral home down the street from your apartment. There is a bartender named Sean who works there. He's a thin, dark-haired man with an impossibly boyish face who grew up in Michigan, loves hockey, and works for the purpose of saving money to travel, which is something you are both fearful of and admire. During your first month in Florida he charmed both you and your mother while she was in town on a visit. He poured you pints of hard cider, made you dinner reservations, called the cab for you, and snuck you both shots of authentic

moonshine that one of the regulars had smuggled in his sweatpants despite the pub only serving beer and wine.

You'd been entranced by Sean's charisma and the way he wove stories in a way that captivated everyone sitting at the bar. You only met him the one time, but he made such an impression that you remember his schedule and he happens to be working that night. You call your mother to tell her your plan. She is a little too excited at the prospect of you getting out of the house. You dress—tall black boots, high-waisted black shorts, a striped crop top that leaves newly tanned skin showing in the gap between the top and your shorts, red lipstick—and drive to the bar alone.

He's leaning against the back of the bar, arms folded across his chest as he's in conversation with the only man at the bar.

"Sorry, ma'am, we're closed," he says and half his mouth curves into a smile.

"Yeah, okay. Get me a drink," you say and sit at the other end of the bar.

"Wow, I like this one. You're like yeah I know you're full of shit now pour me my drink," he says, and you're off.

You banter, you drink, you talk sports, you keep up with the boys. Too many pints of cider later, the bar is closed and he sits in a stool beside you drinking a pint of his own. A band you have requested plays on the bar's computer. You hear a line you like, search for the phone you haven't bothered to check in hours, type in the lyrics: *stay with me tonight—we don't want to be without you*. His hand is on your leg and then your shirt is off and then you're lying across the couch in the back room of the pub where people play pool and you're in nothing but your underwear and you tease him—did he really think you were the sort of girl who was going to sleep with him the first time you hung out—while you kiss his bare chest and then it's eight AM

on Easter Sunday and you're both still at the bar and you decide that you should probably go back to your place and get some sleep.

You sit at your barstool many nights in the coming months listening to him construct stories of his travels for his nightly audience, imagining the trips the two of you may take, listening with cautious excitement to the inquiries of the bar regulars who ask him if you two are an item, why he hasn't made it official yet.

It never quite becomes love—too slow to develop for a romantic like yourself—but isn't the possibility of love often better than the real thing?

**IX.** As it goes, you meet when you least expect it. You're still coping with the break up during your first year of graduate school—trying to make sense of the fact that your ex-boyfriend told you he was at a point in his life when he couldn't commit to any one person, and then began dating a girl who lived eight hours away in Atlanta. You're doing better, though, and dating casually, gaining some of your confidence back, learning to appreciate the attention of men other than the one who left you. Your mom visits for a week. She hasn't seen you since before the break up and the two of you are in desperate need for some mother-daughter time as she says. You book a hotel on the beach for a week. You spend days lying out by the pool, drinking daiquiris and reading and nights walking St. Pete Beach to visit the bars and restaurants. You decide to extend the stay—just one more night—and plan a bar crawl. You dress early, stop for a drink at each bar on a two-mile path, until you arrive at a beachside bar where you had enjoyed cheap beer, wings, and country music days before.

You liked the bartender the other night: a young kid who dropped you a new Corona just as you were finishing the last, but there's a different man behind the bar. He wears a t-shirt with a quote from *The Sandlot*. This is you and your mother's favorite movie and she tells him she

loves his shirt. You eat dinner and drink and he pours the three of you shots every once in a while—his eyes set on yours as you race to down them. When your mother asks what happened to the country music from the other night, Michael reaches into the tip bucket and gives you five dollars. You walk to the jukebox, eager to impress him with your knowledge of country music, and he comes up behind you, rests his chin on your shoulder as you choose songs.

“He is adorable. I love him,” your mother repeats with each Coors Light she drinks.

You ask Michael how old he is. He tells you to guess. Your mother guesses twenty-six. You tell her she is being generous. You say thirty-two. He is thirty-four.

“Oooh, isn’t he too old for me?” you say, thinking of the age difference between your own parents and your mother’s uncertainty any time you began dating an older man.

“Who said he’s for you?” she asks and laughs as she tries to sip from her beer.

For your first date, he takes you to see your favorite baseball team play. His father meets you for drinks before the game. Once you have entered the stadium, he shows you a text from his father: *you’re right—she is a keeper*. Later that night, you are drunk on shots of Jager his friends have bought you to toast the new couple. Michael swears that the two of you will plan a more fun wedding than that of his parents—a wedding everyone in his family still talks about decades later. You vow to throw him the best fortieth birthday anyone has ever had. He makes you promise him that the two of you will never fight and you agree because, for the first time in any relationship you’ve had, that seems possible.

You become more uncertain, which you always do. You and Michael rent a hotel room the weekend before you begin your final year of grad school on the same beach where you met months earlier. He is still working at the bar on this beach though the two of you have recently

signed a lease to move into a house in Orlando while you finish school. On the first night, you get into a fight on your walk home after he has shut down the bar.

You have waited up until three AM to spend time with him and are excited to walk back to the hotel on the beach together. You want to discern the little dips the moon takes toward the water, feel the sand that will remain cool on the soles of your feet for a couple more hours before sunup, listen to the waves and how they sound different with no one else crowding the beach. He's eager to get back to the hotel and opts for side roads and concrete paths.

When you begin to fight it almost feels like you're pursuing something you've been missing—making something calm and beautiful into a moment of intense conflict because you've relied on the feeling of reconciliation for so long. Sometimes you wonder if you live for those desperate declarations of love once the storm had passed: the *'I love yous'* that pass over his tongue on loop until they became more of a compulsive incantation than a sign of affection, the *'I love yous'* that are so passionate his breath catches in the middle of saying it in a near-sob because he suddenly realizes how much he doesn't want to live without you, an *'I love you'* so heavy with emotion that you think you can almost trust it as something that won't go away, though you know if there are enough fights that lead to these reconciliations, it won't last.

So you stay for the reconciliation because you always stay, because you've been taught to stay, because you learn your worth in a relationship through your ability to stay. And you know that no matter how much you fight on this night, the next night you'll sit in your bathing suits together near the water after he has closed the bar again, watch the moon dive into the water and be replaced by the sun, and pretend like your fight never happened. Perhaps it is the knowledge of this resolution that gets you through each petty argument, each screaming fight that leaves you in tears. So you stay.

## A HISTORY OTHERWISE LOST

### From the News: Victorious Waukegan

(December 8, 1991) Nine-month-old Ashley Morgan Bowcott was born into the 1860s. Her second- floor nursery in the house on Sheridan Road in Waukegan is decorated just as it would have been then, from the antique crib and marble-topped dresser to the vintage wallpaper.

The electrified overhead light is a concession ruefully granted by her father, Randy, who has devoted the last 10 years to painstakingly restoring the house, a 12-room Tuscan villa he bought for only \$49,000.

“You could say I`m obsessed,” admitted Bowcott, a professor of criminology and law at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. “It was always my fantasy to own an old house and bring it back to its original beauty. When I finish, stepping inside our front door will be just like going back 130 years.”

Randy Bowcott is not alone. Within a 14-block area just north of downtown Waukegan, scores of bargain-seeking families have bought and are restoring graceful Victorian, Queen Anne, Greek Revival and Italianate houses built in the late 1800s for Waukegan`s early industrialists and shipping barons. When the city`s short-lived boom ended in the early 1900s, their wealthy owners moved on, leaving the grand houses behind.

Many of the houses became home for Waukegan`s working-class families who could not afford to move away, and others, like Bowcott`s villa, were slashed into apartments or rooming houses. The houses sat aesthetically unnoticed until the 1970s, when longtime resident Chandra Simpson Sefton inherited a trunkful of diaries written by her great-great-grandfather, David Simpson, an early Waukegan carpenter who helped build many of the houses.

What Sefton did was begin tracing the history of Waukegan's oldest structures, using her ancestor's diaries and records in real estate title offices. Her hobby became the city's Bicentennial project, and her research turned what had been seen as just a neighborhood of decaying homes into what Warren Wood, Lake County's senior planner for economic development, called "a living museum of domestic architecture."

"I've researched everyone who's owned this house, right back to when it was built, in 1862," Bowcott said. "The first owner was Moses Evans, a doctor who was commissioned into the Civil War. My wife and I have even visited the Georgia battlefield where Moses treated wounded Union soldiers."

Bowcott's research also shows how the stately house had been mistreated. During World War II, the demand for housing at the nearby Great Lakes Naval Training Center was so great that Waukegan officials rezoned the area to allow the city's large single-family homes to be divided into apartments and rooming houses.

"When I bought this house," Bowcott recalled, "it was an apartment building, with four kitchens, four living rooms, four stoves. Before that, it had been used as a baby nursery during World War II and then as a rooming house by a guy who was an accountant. I have records detailing how much rent he collected from each of the 12 tenants. Since there were only four bathrooms, I assume they must have shared."

Bowcott is now committed to taking the house back to its origins, so that if Moses Evans walked in the front door again, he would feel right at home. He began his project by easing out his tenants—there's one left—then by removing walls, partitions and extra kitchens and by scraping away decades of abuse.



“My worst experience was the winter I spent on my hands and knees in the downstairs parlor, the space that had been used as a playroom during the baby nursery days,” Bowcott said. “Two layers of linoleum had been tacked down with that black mastic gunk and it took me one and a half months of working with a blow torch and putty knife to get it off.”

The original pine floor he finally uncovered has since been stained to imitate a reddish mahogany, and it now shines beneath an antique rug and Late Empire furniture. The wallpaper pattern, he explained, is called Isis and is “historically authentic. You might say I’m a hard-liner when it comes to restoration. Whenever possible, I use only materials and furnishings which were available in the 1860s and ‘70s.”

Bowcott softened that line slightly for the sake of his wife and daughter. Of course, there was no electricity when Dr. Evans built the house, but natural gas arrived in Waukegan in 1876. As a concession to that much progress, Bowcott has purchased several huge gas chandeliers and converted them into electric fixtures. He also endures indoor plumbing, although one toilet has a pull chain, and Ashley takes her baths in a claw-footed tub.

“It’s the kitchen question that’s the hardest in the old house stuff,” he said. “Of course, if this kitchen were restored to the original period, there’d be no appliances or running water, and we’d have bins of things everywhere.”

Instead, he has taken an interpretative approach. “You still have the feel of an old kitchen which has been sensitively updated to the late 19th Century,” he said.

In simpler terms, Bowcott has installed a garbage disposal in his authentic copper kitchen sink and hidden a refrigerator, a microwave and even a dishwasher in the pantry. The family meals, however, are cooked on a 100-year-old wood-burning stove that has been discreetly

converted to gas.

Bowcott said he has never kept track of all the money he's spent to restore his villa:

"It would be too depressing. The 1860s kerosene chandeliers hanging here are a good example. I bought four of them for \$400, but when I cleaned them up I realized that several parts, including some of the glass fonts, were missing. I had spent two years trying to find the right parts before I discovered a dealer in Rockford who had two barns full of authentic chandelier parts. Within 45 minutes I'd found just what I needed, but it cost me another \$400."

Some replication projects are too expensive to even contemplate, Bowcott said. "In the 1860s, drapes were made of broadcloth or chintz and were designed to puddle onto the floor. We asked the woman who had made the drapes for Lincoln's home in Springfield to come up and give us an estimate. She said it would cost us \$1,000 a window, and we have 22 windows. Obviously, we have to find some other way to make them, even if it means that I have to learn to sew."

The professor added that some of the expensive mistakes restoring homeowners make can be avoided if they research a project before they begin:

"I almost sandblasted the paint off the brick on the outside of my house. That would have opened the face of the brick and loosened up the entire structure. But after living here seven years I finally found a company that would chemically strip the brick without damaging it. Now the house is the same salmon and cream color that Dr. Evans himself selected."

Bowcott and other Historic District pioneers have learned so much about the techniques of restoration that they are willing to share their expertise with their neighbors.

“We’ve developed a real network of homeowners and of old Waukegan residents who are willing to tell the newcomers what they remember about their houses,” said Sharon Laughlin, coordinator of the Haines Museum for the Waukegan Historical Society. “A homeowner will come in with a problem, and we’ll put them in touch with Mrs. So and So, who used to play in their parlor as a child. Or we’ll suggest that a person starting a project, like adding a grained finish to woodwork, contact someone who did the same thing. We’ve tried to create a let’s-do-this-together atmosphere.”

Randy Bowcott said he hopes his efforts, and those of his neighbors in the Near North Historic District, will help other people see beyond the surface of things.

“I hope that when Ashley and the other children here grow up, they’ll be more sensitive to the past. I believe I’m giving my daughter more than a unique place to live. I’m also giving her a sense of history that would otherwise have been lost.”

### **A Brief Biography**

My parents tell me that I am born on the coldest day that winter: January 23, 1991. When I am brought home days later—carried through those blue double doors and transported into the 1860s—it is a day nearly as cold. On my first day in the house, my parents hold me in a baby carrier for pictures. I am wrapped in layers of pink blankets and the only features you can make out are the roundness of my cheeks.

The nursery was finished just in time for my birth and in the pictures, my parents pose with me beside the antique mahogany crib. The wallpaper is navy blue with gold leaves and a pink banner that reads ‘It’s a Girl!’ hangs in contrast on the wall over the crib. An antique bed covered with stuffed animals is pushed against the adjoining wall of the room.

In another picture, they pose on the staircase in the front hallway. It is the staircase for which my father made each spindle and its curved railing in his woodshop in the basement. He stands with his hand on the smooth wood of the railing. My mother holds the carrier so I am level with the rail. They are both still in their black peacoats that hang heavy like straightjackets from their tall frames. My father wears a plaid newsboy cap, too, and when the pictures are developed, he looks like he could be from the same era that the house is. Standing steps above my mother for the picture, it's like he's retreating into the house, deeper into its past, and we are trying to move forward, our histories never matching up except for the briefest of moments.

My father. Born March 21, 1949 in St. Louis, Missouri to a Navy pilot and a teacher. His parents are wealthy. He grows up in a gated community in a suburb of the city. He has a brother—three years older—and both boys are the blue-eyed, blond-haired all-American types. They play sports: baseball, track, basketball. They awake on Christmas morning in 1962 to find that their father has died of a cancer he kept hidden from the family. My father never learns how to handle the pain of that discovery.

My father grows up, moves away. First to Nashville where he gets a degree from Vanderbilt. Then Milwaukee where he gets another degree, this time a Masters. Then Chicago where he begins coursework for a PhD in Criminal Justice at University of Chicago, but he doesn't finish. Instead, he moves north of the city and into a flea-ridden mansion that's been turned into tenements. He begins working as a professor at the junior colleges in the area and saves enough money to buy each tenant out until it is just him and one other woman. She moves to the back of the house and he begins renovations to restore the house to the way it would have looked during the Civil War.

Rewind a bit, though not quite to the start. April 4, 1967. My mother is born in Waukegan, Illinois in the year that my father begins college, still 520 miles away from the town he will call home starting in 1981. She is born to a travel agent and a city worker. She is the middle of three children. Her parents' divorce when she is eight and both quickly re-marry.

Her mother marries a man who buys a bar and restaurant just four miles up on the same road and four years after my father buys his own home. My mother's family is hardly home because of the business—they're either working or drinking at the bar—so her house becomes the place to party. She spends her high school days drinking cases of Miller Lite and breaking into the swimming pool at the country club down the street.

She falls in love, too. With a baseball player from her high school. Though they don't start dating until senior year when they have chosen different schools to attend in the fall, they stay together. My mother leaves for Indiana University in 1985 to study telecommunications and criminal justice.

She returns home on school breaks and begins working in the newly opened restaurant her stepfather owns. He fires her three times in one year so the next time she comes home, she gets a job at Ace Hardware. The store is a couple blocks from the house my father bought, and though he has been there almost a decade, the restoration is endless and he spends lots of his spare time at this store, which, as I'm sure you've guessed, is where they meet.

### **The Dr. Moses Evans Residence**

606 N. Sheridan Road

Built Circa 1857

Landmarked June 19, 2006

This home was built in 1857 for Dr. Moses Evans, who owned a medical practice with Dr. David Cory, one of Waukegan's most prominent early residents. The two-story brick house is built in the Italianate style with tall arched windows, an open porch across the facade and a simple unadorned cornice. The property was originally five times larger than it is today and extended west to Genesee Street. In 1862, Evans was mustered into the Union Army as a surgeon with the Illinois 96th and traveled extensively with General Grant, being present at the battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga, where he was wounded. He returned to his home in 1865 at the conclusion of the war, and soon after sold the property for \$7,800 to raise needed funds to restart his medical practice, located at the corner of Genesee and Washington. He later served as Waukegan postmaster.

The house has had six owners since Dr. Evans sold the property, including a prominent dentist (Dr. Shugart), the owner of a roofing company (Ford), and the owners of a vacuum company (Morrow). The rear addition was added in the 1970's and includes a servant's wing on the second floor. While owned by the Morrow family, it was converted to a two-flat. During World War II, it served as a nursery, where mothers could drop off their children for day care, allowing them to join the work force as part of the war effort. At the close of the war, it was bought by an accountant, Leonard Murray, who owned several rental properties. He converted it into an apartment building, with each room being rented separately. When the current owner, Randy Bowcott, acquired the property in 1981, it was being used as a four-unit apartment building. He gradually de-converted the property back into a single-family home. The exterior and interior have been extensively and accurately restored to their original 1870 appearance.

### **House Tour, The Dr. Moses Evan Residence**

(2010) While my father is away at rehab, his older brother flies in from California to get my father's affairs in order. My father had spent the previous month in jail and had such bad withdrawals from alcohol that we are worried his health could quickly deteriorate if he returns from rehab and begins drinking again.

The desk in the library spills over with unpaid bills and notices for court appearances. Wintry air blows through the cracks in the stained glass above the front door and some snow drifts in to rest on the crown molding. Water damage softens the corners of each room until the ceilings are yellowed like an old book and shavings of damp drywall collect like snow banks on the carpet. Cat urine stains the custom-made drapery in the front parlor. The walls by the back staircase are scuffed and dented from the number of times my father tripped up or down the steps. The hot tub built into the bathroom at the back of the house is filled with algae-pocked water and a frothy white film. The pale-blue paint of the wraparound porch has chipped away and patches of the boards are soft underfoot. The life-size *Gone with the Wind* book statue on the front sidewalk has rotted away, revealing a shelter for an animal and its family. Squirrels have chewed their way through the foam mat that blocked the entrance to the fireplace through the chimney and bits of paper and food are scattered through the house from their conquest.

The antique mirror in the front parlor is mottled black from a candle left burning too long beneath it. Piles of cat food and rat skeletons and clumps of cat litter, un-scooped and smelling of ammonia, are deposited on both floors of the home. The ivy on the north side of the house grows through the windows of the master bedroom, strong enough to pop the storm windows out of their frame. We collect a dozen garbage bags full of trash, and then a dozen more of booze hidden throughout the landmark home.

**Facts: On Civil War and Family**

**Fact:** The Civil War began on April 12, 1861 when Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852, is often cited as a cause of the Civil War, as the harsh renderings of slavery in the South shocked readers both in the North and abroad.

**Fact:** My father has a late nineteenth century copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the library of his home. It is on a shelf among decomposing Civil War sardine cans, bullet casings shrouded in dust, Union and Confederate propaganda pamphlets, and a Union soldier's backpack.

**Fact:** It is estimated that Civil War soldiers marched fifteen to twenty miles each day. There are more than twenty federal historic sites, fifty museums, and seventy national cemeteries dedicated to the Civil War.

**Fact:** I spend much of my childhood visiting these landmarks, sitting in the backseats of hot cars on long drives with no air conditioning. We tour the American South in search of old battlegrounds, scour antique stores for Civil War memorabilia, attend concerts where men in traditional Civil War uniforms sing military songs, look at graves of people I will never know. As a kid, it feels like I march fifteen to twenty miles each day, helping my father search for answers to questions I'm not even sure of.

**Fact:** In two days at the Battle of Shiloh near the Tennessee River, more Americans died than in all previous American wars combined. During the Battle of Antietam, 12,401 Union men were killed, missing, or wounded. With a total of 23,000 casualties on both sides, it was the single bloodiest day of the Civil War.

**Fact:** My father battles my mother on the names of us kids for months before we are born. He fights for the names 'Shiloh' and 'Antietam' both times: unisex names for his unborn children as our genders will not be revealed until the days we are born. He has encyclopedias of



the Civil War, books on tape, and hours of documentaries. I wonder if he is even thinking of the bloodshed of these two battles when he argues for these names. How could he not?

**Fact:** In the twenty years after the Civil War, the national divorce rate increased 150%.

**Fact:** My father is the first person in his family to divorce—over three hundred years of Bowcott lineage, he tells me. My mother is nowhere near the first person in her family to divorce. Her parents divorced when she was young and her father had been divorced a second time before my mother graduated college. Both my mother’s siblings have been divorced. Her uncle married and divorced six times. My parents stay married ten years before they separate and then divorce three years after that.

One Thanksgiving, my brother and I arrive for lunch at my father’s house. He has started drinking early and the food he once took such pride in is mostly undercooked—the inner cuts of the turkey still pink, chunks of whole, tough potatoes in the mash. Rather than offer a prayer before the meal like he usually does, he tells us that he has an announcement.

“The past few years haven’t been easy on me with everything your mother has done to keep this family apart. I can’t stand being the first one to bring the shame of divorce to my family, but I just sort of realized I don’t have to be lonely. So I wanted to let you know that by this time next year, there will be another guest at the Thanksgiving table.”

He tells us that he is getting married and shows us a picture of his soon-to-be wife. It has been printed on regular paper from his computer. The printer must be running out of ink because lines run across the picture and the whole image is tinted pink. The woman has curly blond hair piled in a bun on top of her head. She appears to be much younger than him as her skin is a perfect, glowing bronze and is free of wrinkles. In the picture, she’s drinking from a glass of

champagne, which is suiting because the bubbles in the glass match the bubbles around her naked body.

The picture our father shows us while we are gathered at the table for Thanksgiving is of his future wife taking a bubble bath. Later he tapes the picture to the wall beside his bed. We never hear about the woman again.

He does get engaged once more—to his high school sweetheart—but she calls the wedding off months before they are to be married. My mother never remarries. Instead she spends more than a decade with the man she begins dating during her separation from my father. Not until they've been together fifteen years does she start pressuring him to get married. Perhaps she needed time to make sure she knew this man—really knew him—and wasn't going to misjudge him in the same way she had my father.

**Fact:** Disease was the chief killer of the war, taking two men for everyone who died of battle wounds.

**Fact:** Number of alcoholic liver disease deaths annually in the U.S.—16,749. Number of alcohol-induced deaths, excluding accidents and homicides in the U.S.—26,654. My father has been involved in three hit-and-run DUIs, has hit a deer and a fence while driving under the influence, has been placed in a drug-induced coma because of extreme withdrawal, has shattered his C-1 vertebrae and other vertebrae along his spine, has been diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver, has been compared to having the organ functions of an eighty-five-year-old man. The disease of alcoholism has yet to claim him entirely.

**Fact:** Dr. Moses Evans, the man who built my father's house, joined the army as a surgeon with the Illinois 96<sup>th</sup>. He traveled extensively with General Grant.

**Fact:** My father spends a month in the Lake County Jail, three blocks from the home Moses Evans built 150 years earlier. Because he has accumulated several charges leading up to his jailing, he is originally placed on the maximum-security level. He is surrounded by hardened criminals despite the fact that he is nearly sixty years old and has no history of violence. Fortunately for him, the withdrawals from alcohol lead to a serious detox that requires medical attention. He serves the rest of his sentence in a drug-induced coma in the medical wing of the jail, hallucinating visions of traveling to the battlefronts with Grant and Evans by his side, singing “When Johnny Comes Marching Home.”

**Fact:** After forty-eight days of siege, the Confederate General, John C. Pemberton, surrendered Vicksburg, Mississippi to the Union General, Ulysses S. Grant on July 4, 1863. The fourth of July is not celebrated in this town for another eighty-one years.

**Fact:** My father has a vacation house near Galena, Illinois, which is where Grant had a house. We tour the brick home near the river at least once a year.

My father meets a woman while online dating. She’s a nurse from Vicksburg, Mississippi. My brother and I are taught to hate the South for slavery and everything else they did to start the Civil War, but in the summer before I begin seventh grade, my father purchases a portable DVD player that he straps to the center console of his SUV and we make the drive down to Mississippi to meet this woman and her kids.

On the last day of the trip, we take a horse-drawn carriage ride through the historic part of town. The driver points out the different sites that played a role in the siege. These tours have been a part of my childhood as far back as I can remember and I’ve taken to reading up on the history of the Civil War so a lot of what the driver tells us is familiar to me.

It's August in Mississippi, which means a sweltering heat like I've never known. Big metallic flies gather in the mane and tail of the horse as it drags us over brick-paved streets. The nurse's daughter sits in my father's lap, her blond afro of curls melting to the porcelain skin of her forehead. It's something I can't ever remember doing as a child and the little girl bounces on his bony legs with each uneven stone we pass over, his arms unsure where to hold or steady this child who is not his.

The driver tells us about a Civil War Era law that prohibited women from showing their bosoms even in the privacy of their home until after a certain time of day. My father checks the scuffed surface of his watch, announces that it is past that time of afternoon, and glances to the nurse who is sitting across from him in the carriage. Her large breasts stretch the buttons of her blouse, revealing the dull beige of her bra.

"Oh, you could see my bosom anytime," she says with a smile and a thick Southern accent and continues to fan herself as the carriage jostles us about.

**Fact:** Potential Civil War recruits were offered bounties for enlisting, sometimes as much as \$650. Bounty jumping became a profession and men would sign up, desert the army, and re-enlist on the other side. One man repeated this process thirty-two times before he was caught. The Civil War was also the first to use a national draft.

**Fact:** Both my father and his brother are eligible for the 1969 Vietnam draft. My uncle's birthday is picked fifth overall, making his military service unavoidable. My father's birthday is the 280<sup>th</sup> pick that year, with no one over the 195<sup>th</sup> round serving involuntarily. He is free to continue studying Criminal Justice at Vanderbilt University while his brother and classmates are shipped off to war. It is while his brother is overseas that my father's drinking really gets serious: at football games, in his apartment, while working late hours at the bars, before class.

**Fact:** Abraham Lincoln was the President of the Union during the Civil War. Though he was born in Kentucky, Illinois became his home state.

**Fact:** Because my father's house was built before the Civil War, he often entertains the idea that Lincoln could have stayed over while traveling one night. We spend much of my childhood researching the various tours Lincoln took during the war and where each regiment he visited was stationed. So much of my childhood focused on Lincoln's life that when I was in preschool, I was sure Lincoln worked at our local supermarket because sometimes I would spot a tall, thin man with a wrinkled forehead and dark beard in the back behind the milk coolers. When I move away and get a house of my own, my father offers me some of the antique furniture he spent years collecting. He tries to give me the bed from my bedroom at his house, but I decline it many times with too many memories of uncomfortable, sleepless nights. I have never been at ease in the past in the same way he has. He sends me the following email:

Right after I read your e mail I had an appraiser that Harry knows from Savannah look carefully at the bed. The one I want you to have. Thought it was nice. Brought it on the porch for better light. Took it apart, and under one of the side "rails" noticed some faint writing. It was the signature of the first owner of the bed "J Speed." Got his attention, because a "Joshua Speed" was Abraham Lincoln's best friend- and law partner in Springfield in the 1840's and 1850's. When Lincoln was poor, it is said he shared a bed with Joshua Speed to save money. Some have suggested Lincoln was gay, though I don't think so. The Appraiser definitely identified and legitimated the signature of Speed. He flipped the footboard over and in the lower left corner was "A Lincoln, 1847" I saw it. Authenticated. So, this was the original bed from their room next to his office in Springfield (we went there). It is NOT 1880's- more like 1830's! And Lincoln's! We went inside to call the Lincoln Library and Museum in Springfield to tell them what we had found- only the Chicago Historical Society has something like this- the bed Lincoln died in at the Peterson boarding house across from Ford's Theatre the night of April 14, 1865. I was shaking. Priceless.

We came outside to begin to plan what to do with it- probably donate to the museum in Springfield, even though I had offered it to you. You seemed like it didn't fit into your plans anyway. Ash, the bed was GONE!!!! Someone in a beat-up blue Ford pickup (no license plates) stole it from our porch! I assume to scrap

it. Called the police- no luck- with no plates and no description of the people....could be anywhere.

I will always remember this. Do you also remember the board game "Never Ending Stories" we played when you were about 6? The premise was, when it was your turn, you got to make up a story. I made up this story. But isn't it a GREAT ONE?! You come from a long line of writers. No surprise you are as well. BTW. Still have the bed! Do you want it NOW?! Dad

My father knows I am a writer and that I have always enjoyed a good story. As a child, I made him play the *Never Ending Stories* board game any time he took a break from reading or grading student papers. We took turns reaching our hands into the bag of hexagonal tiles and scanning over the image on each, searching for the right details of the stories we wanted to tell. Though our early days of storytelling strengthened my interest in writing, as I grew older I became more drawn to the truth of the stories of my life rather than the far-fetched characters and events I described in the hours we played *Never Ending Stories* on the carpet of the front parlor. Perhaps each winding path we made with tiles and words taught my father the opposite: that he could spin any event into the sort of story he wanted to tell.

### **The Marathon Runner**

(2011) I am home from college for spring break. In the year before, I cut ties with my father completely after his failed rehab attempt.

Though he disregards the Twelve Steps of his rehab program, he must've latched onto some of the suggestions his counselor had, because he begins sending me emails in an attempt to repair our relationship. While addicts are encouraged to admit to their mistakes and work to listen and heal the relationships with those they have hurt or neglected in the years that addiction has ruled their lives, my father's emails are unanswered monologues on the strides he has supposedly made in the days since he left rehab. He tells me how he is working to restore the

house once again, how he runs every morning in preparation for a marathon, how he is well-respected and revered in the Waukegan community. He writes of lunches and brainstorm meetings with the mayor, dates with engineers, and panels he's writing for newspapers.

I bring my college boyfriend home with me and am eager to show him some of my favorite places in my hometown. We borrow my mom's car one morning so I can take him to Horsefeathers, a store that sells jewelry, tapestries, and incense on the once lively, now abandoned, main street of my father's town. The storefront is a few blocks from the county jail and the office where my mother works as a probation officer, so I am used to seeing homeless people wandering the area.

As I turn into a spot outside the store and begin feeling around the cup holders for change to feed the meter, I notice an older man limping down the sidewalk. Though it is March, it is still below freezing. The man wears a thin green ski jacket tinged brown with dirt. The fabric covering the right shoulder has a slit that stuffing spills out from. His knuckles are split, pink and chapped from the cold, and he holds a shamrock shake topped with whipped cream and a cherry from the McDonald's down the street, his hands trembling. The silvery-gray wisps of hair are stiffened and combed to one side, but the harsh winter winds fan the whole section of hair off his head like a sheet of newspaper blowing flatly across a sidewalk. The broken vessels of his face are red from the cold and blue-gray veins bulge across his forehead. The laces on his tennis shoes, stained green from years of mowing grass, are untied and caught in the damp bottoms of his jeans. He looks lost as he shuffles directly in front of where I parked the car.

"Isn't that your dad?" my boyfriend asks from the passenger seat.

He met my dad just once the night I picked up my two cats from his house when I got my first apartment.

My heartbeat quickens as I look at the man again and realize that it is my father and that I'd mistaken him for the homeless who camped on those streets. I worry he'll recognize my mother's silver minivan, the one he bought for her, and knock on the window, eager to reconcile.

If he notices the car, he doesn't let on. He doesn't even glance toward the street, just continues his path down the sidewalk, occasionally sipping from the bright green shake in his shivering hands. Still we wait in the warmth of the car until he disappears around the corner before we walk into the store.

My father, the man who'd had a halo wedged into his skull half a year before as he began rehabilitation from a drunken fall down the stairs he'd built at the front of his house; this stranger who'd aged decades in a matter of months, who still wrote to me, painting himself as the marathon runner he once was.

### **The Easier Solution**

I get mad at my mother for her drinking often. As a child, my brother and I throw fits each time my mother and her boyfriend drink in front of us. They take us on trips to Wisconsin Dells and cabins in the woods farther north in Wisconsin. They spend days with us shopping, going to arcades, swimming pools, on rafting trips, fishing, playing sports. Some nights we drive into town and stop in bars with stuffed moose heads hanging on the cedar walls. They buy us kiddie cocktails and give us quarters to play games and eat free peanuts that the bartenders leave in baskets on the high-top tables while they drink bottle after bottle of Miller Lite. When our stack of quarters has dwindled too low to play more games, we hang the weight of our bodies from the backs of their seats at the bar and beg them to leave.

"One more," they always say, and we can smell the pale malt on their breaths, see the way their eyes begin to gloss over.



The minutes in these bars stretch long and unbearable for my brother and me. We can't believe the brazenness our mother and her boyfriend have to drink so publicly. Alcohol was always our family's best-kept secret, and her drinking in a bar seems a betrayal of the silence the three of us enacted in the years we lived in our father's house together.

When one more drink turns into two or three more, my brother and I grow angry. We tell them they drink too much. We try to throw away their beers before they are finished. We cry and kick and whine because we can't seem to get away from drinking no matter where we go.

In the year I begin high school, my mother and I are at a Memorial Day party at her best friend's house. The women sit on the deck and drink beer. When my mother has to drive, she always limits herself to two or three beers. Still, one of the women looks over at my mom, asks her if she's getting a buzz on, and my mother nods: always a people pleaser.

I know she isn't drunk, that she's just trying to make the woman who has already begun slurring her words feel better about getting drunk while the sun is still out, but even the idea of my mother being drunk upsets me. I look up from the cellphone I always seem to be on these days, stare at her and shake my head before I storm off to suntan on the driveway that burns hot on my skin the way my anger toward her burns in my cheeks.

When she finds me minutes later, she has traded her bottle of Miller Lite for a water bottle.

"I'm not drunk, honey," she says.

I tell her that I know, but that I can't stand the idea of her drinking, that it scares me to see her do something that my father has done in the privacy of his house for as long as I can remember, something that has changed him long before I could even understand how serious his problem was.

I never get angry with my father for his drinking. I never even mention his drinking to him. Not once. I guess it's the easier solution to get mad at the parent who you know is never going to cause the real problems for the family.

### **How I Drink**

I drink until two a.m., four a.m., five a.m. I drink in the country bar beneath the el tracks where the red line clammers through the north side of Chicago, drowning out the noise of “Wagon Wheel” playing for the second time that hour. I chase shots of Fireball with Bud Light straight from the pitcher. I walk past the line of people waiting at the front door, wave at the bouncer who tells me he is twenty-eight but is probably closer to forty, and let myself through the emergency exit. Later I press the bouncer against the wall of the back bar, kiss him as a ‘thank you’ for the free drinks, the line-jumping, the fact that he lets me stay and drink long after the bar is closed. I tell him that we should have sex—just once, to say that we did—because I’ve never been with a black man, not really. We never do.

I drink at Sluggers: a bar across the street from Wrigley Field where I pay too much for lemon drop shots in cracked plastic shot glasses. I drink in their upstairs bar where I challenge men to Pop A Shot and swings in the batting cages. I always win because I can’t stand the idea of giving them any reason to think I am weak, but really I can’t stand to give them any reason to leave me, though they haven’t even decided to stay. I drink in the downstairs bar where a DJ plays top forty hits and people crowd the sticky dance floor with Chicago Cubs windbreakers tied around their waists and Old Style tallboy cans in hand. I drink until I find a boy to kiss—I always do—and then we drink more together. Days after my college boyfriend and I break up, I meet a man who orders me whiskey-sprites and we sing “Hey Mickey” and “Steal My Sunshine” and Ace of Base even though he tells me I am too young to know the words to any of the songs.

When he disappears, I begin to cry, beg his friends for his phone number, and call him over and over with no response. In the morning I erase his number and the text messages I have sent him without reading them.

I drink at the late-night bar on Clark Street that my friends and I swear we're going to stop going to because no one has any business drinking after three a.m., but that we always end up at anyways. I drink at the music venue by Wrigley where bands play covers of nineties songs and a group of Canadian boys teach me to take shots of tequila by licking their neck that has been dabbed with salt and sucking the lime from between their lips. I drink at dollar beer night at the bar near my college campus, the late-night bar that plays Oldies—fifties in the basement, sixties on the main level, seventies upstairs—near the edge of downtown, the bar with big picnic benches and a beer garden down the street from my house, one of the clubs downtown that celebrities go to where my friends and I fake interest in a group of men who ordered bottle service long enough for us to make a couple free drinks at their table.

I drink at the speakeasy-style bar on Lincoln Avenue where I order twelve-dollar cocktails like I can afford them: where I once meet a man for a date who he tells me that he has epilepsy after a man playing pool jerks his cue back and shatters one of our glasses on the table in front of us. I drink at the whiskey bar where I order English ciders and American whiskey on-the-rocks and talk politics while seventies porn plays on mute on the TV above the bar. I drink at the bars on the two-mile stretch of Lincoln between my college campus and my apartment one St. Patrick's day when my roommates and I decide to walk home. We stop in every bar we pass for rounds of Irish Car Bombs until we are taking pictures with men dressed like Elvis and trading shoes because we're sure they're the reason we're having trouble walking. I drink in a Cuban restaurant where I watch the parchment-paper blades of fans turn as I drink mojitos and

shots of tequila and listen to hail pelt the canvas awning outside. I drink in penthouse bars at the tops of hotels where I worry if I will have enough money to buy the next round for the people I am trying to impress with the idea that I have it all together. I take pictures to memorize the way the skyline looks at night, to remind myself that I am lucky to be this person in this city because I know I won't remember it on my own. I drink on rooftop bars crowded with young people in the few months a year it is warm enough to be outside in Chicago. I sip champagne and sweat and dance.

I drink in Amsterdam, ordering Jack and Cokes, but forgetting to sip from the bottle of Coke that is served separate from the alcohol. I take Jager bombs with French boys—the language of alcohol universal—and wear one of their coats as we walk along the canals that fill with swans at night—the blackness of water beneath us hidden by a blanket of white feathers—and I pretend to take a picture of the swans when I am really trying to get a picture of the girls in the windows of the Red Light District who I am fascinated by because I think their lives are so different from my own. We drink in more bars on the way to their hotel until I wake up next to one of the French men pressing his thumb up and down into clenched fingers, failing to remember the English word for “lighter,” which I tell him I don't have before I dress and fumble my way through the dark, new city in search of my own hotel.

I drink in Dublin where I kiss four boys at the bar on my first night in town. Where, on the second night, I pass around a bottle of Fireball that my roommates and I have smuggled in our luggage until I am drunk enough to kiss another boy.

I drink beer through a straw—to get drunk faster—on a bar crawl in Prague and when we end the night at a burrito stand on one of the cobblestone streets, I meet an Australian man who I kiss while my roommates cheer me on in a cab. I drink until I am sneaking away to a spot on the

stairs between the second and third floor of a Czech nightclub because it's the only spot to get Internet access. I drink until I'm emailing the Australian and giving him the address to my hostel to meet me there when the bars close the next night.

I drink until the bars close and then drink some more on nights when my roommates and I invite men back to our apartment—a three-flat at the south end of a stretch of eighty-seven bars in the Wrigleyville neighborhood. We gather in the living room and drink, a country music channel playing on the TV in the background. My roommate and I sneak shots of Svedka that we don't need in the kitchen, cringe with the heat of straight vodka as the sounds of the all-night trains leaving the station in our backyard speed past our kitchen window. We smoke hookah and drink wine from coffee cups and sing The Dixie Chicks like we have nowhere to be but here. We talk about the Sandy Hook shooting and what it means to be a kid these days.

I find myself arguing this man or that man's point—whomever I decide I like better for that night—because I want to appear educated, but more than that, I want to be agreeable. I inhale big breaths of hookah, exhale them slowly until I'm hidden behind a cloud of thick, florally smoke, masked enough to look straight at the man I've chosen and smile, which gets him to invite himself into my bedroom at the end of the night without saying a word. In my room, we undress shyly, fold our clothes at the end of the bed, climb under the covers together, run our hands across the other's cheek, and try to figure out what it is we have to offer each other away from the bars, the music, the smoke, and the chatter. It's enough to make me wish we could have another drink.

I drink with roommates, coworkers, men I meet at the bars, Chicago Cubs coaches, their bullpen catcher, friends from out of town, drag queens, my mother, my cousins, my best friend since birth, my college boyfriend, my high school boyfriends, a man from the Peace Corps on his

first weekend back from Africa, the owner of a late-night grilled cheese restaurant who cries to me about his dying dog, a bachelor party for a famous author, a man who plays for the Cleveland Indians and his hometown buddies, managers, restaurant owners, men I meet while online dating, Irish students in town for the summer, friends from elementary school.

I drink one-dollar well drinks, one-dollar beers, three-dollar shots of fireball, fifteen-dollar glasses of champagne, Wisconsin old-fashioned, five-dollar pitchers of beer, rye whiskey with dry vermouth and orange bitters, bottomless mimosas, pitchers of frozen mango margaritas, mojitos muddled with fresh mint, bottles of white wine, extra-spicy Bloody Marys, Mai Tais from the vendor near the bleachers at Wrigley, craft beer, hot spiced wine at the Christmas markets in Europe, sangria, bottles of champagne when Alabama wins the national football championship, five-dollar forties of Coors Light, fishbowls, Jameson and pickle juice, shots of Malort, anything included in the Friday after work all-you-can-drink package, a drink called a “Hangover Helper.”

I drink until my father comes up in conversation, until I’m telling those I drink with all the horrible things my father’s drinking did to our family. I drink until I’m talking about the night my baby brother crawled from his crib and found our father at the landing of the stairs, crumpled in nothing but his underwear and bleeding from the side of his head where he sliced his ear on an oscillating fan, the way he would sit in the dark and yell slurred words at the baseball players on TV, the day I went to take my driver’s test to get my license and found a solo cup of vodka sloshing its contents onto the ground beneath the driver’s seat of his car, the time I signed off on paperwork to revoke his license plates after three hit-and-run DUIs left him so desperate for a new car that he forged my signature for the title and insurance. I drink until I am bitter

about addiction and those who fall powerless to it. I don't drink to understand; I drink to justify my inability to understand.

I drink until I hear myself say that I know I can enjoy a few drinks, a night out, but that I won't ever be like my father because I know myself better than that and I know I can practice more self-control, that I've looked addiction in the face and decided I hated it, that our paths would never converge like the paths so many children of alcoholics do. I drink until my voice slurs under the weight of these words.

I drink until I am in love or in love with the possibility of love, or both. I drink until I am texting my friends that I have met my future husband, I'm sure of it. I drink until I convince one man I am dating not to join the military like he is considering, my plea of *stay here with me* the unspoken undertone of my argument. I drink until I reach for the hand of this man, the shoulder of that man, the mouth of another, until I am laughing and kissing and dancing and planning for a future that seems attainable in that moment.

I drink until my roommates and I say things like “feel free to add more Fireball to that drink” to the bartenders we're getting to know on Clark Street. We drink until we're winking at them and hugging them around the waist—moves I'd never be able to pull off without a few drinks—and laughing off the comments about free booze like we're just kidding, but we're always happy when they circle back, top off our drinks, and we can feel the renewed burn of cinnamon with each sip. We drink more and more and more again until we know nothing but these bars on this street with these strangers we call friends.

I drink until my mom worries. I'm ditching class and work for baseball games and bars. I'm staying up until five or six in the morning every day, sleeping in late, and feeding myself nothing but grease to cure my hangover. I'm stopping at the twenty-four hour diner after the

bars have closed, drinking coffee and eating loaded potato skins, carrying home bags full of Taco Bell as the street cleaners brush their way through the debris of another Wrigleyville bar night as the sun comes up. I'm walking past the row house on Belden near my college—the house my father tells me he lived in when he first moved to Chicago to start his PhD—and stumbling over the uneven spaces in the sidewalk with the smell of vodka on my breath. I tell my mom not to worry. I tell her that I'm still doing well in school, and I am. I end the semester after I turn twenty-one with a 4.0 GPA. I feel like I have it all together, and maybe I do, but maybe that's the same sort of excuse my father used for so long.



## NOTES FROM MY FATHER

Subject: Que esta tu domicilio?

Told ya I lived in Spain. What IF I want to send you "algo?"

Fuzzy socks, pink and purple pastels, plucked from an end-cap at the grocery store, the orange clearance sticker left on, which you receive for your eighteenth birthday. Teal hospital socks with thick, bulbous pads on the soles that he wore during a same-day surgery. Plants: the sort in cracked plastic containers the color of wet clay with dirt smeared across the sides and bottom, whose stalks sprout shyly from the dry soil, barely enough to know if there is something worth nurturing. A Civil War soldier's backpack, the leather peeling away in patches, the brass buckles calcified in rust. It is stuffed with thin felt blankets the pink color of insulation in your attic. Your father tells you the fabric is there to help the pack retain its shape and that you'll never remove it because it will decrease the appraisal value. You want to push your arms through the loose leather straps and walk around the house, imagining what life would have been like as a soldier in the 1860s; you don't understand the point of a gift that you can do nothing but stare at. Pamphlets from the confederacy, bullet casings deformed and shrouded in dirt, dusty sardine cans whose tops are rolled back and hinge delicately on the back of the tin. A white and blue hat signed by the 2000 Duke men's basketball team and Coach Krzyzewski, which your brother and dad spend the night examining a hundred times over, debating whose signature is whose, while you sit near the fireplace feeling sorry for yourself as you draw different colored spirals with the art kit you received at the same time—the cheap kind whose crayons leave flecks of wax behind rather than filling in fluid lines. An XXXL vintage football jersey that your brother and you climb into on Christmas day after you have been dropped back off at your mom's, laughing so hard you almost lose your balance and tumble to the floor. Garage sale

clothes heavy with the scent of mothballs, rosaries purchased for two easy payments of \$9.95 from a late night infomercial, items you have owned for years re-wrapped and re-gifted to you as if they are new. A newspaper clipping from the year your brother's high school basketball team went to the Illinois state championship, rusted cans of cat food, an Albert Pujols bobble head from his rookie year with the St. Louis Cardinals (the head arrives with a crack in the jaw), a sun-bleached t-shirt that reads 'Greyhounds: the King of dogs,' the program from your grandmother's memorial service in North Carolina, a Polaroid picture of you holding your cats the summer before you began junior high—the blunt bangs cut directly across your forehead curled under heavily because they had not been trimmed in months, the shadow of a black eye slowly bruising to yellow from an incident playing catch with your mom's boyfriend, a collection of Girl Scout patches never sewn onto the vest. TV specials recorded on VHS tapes with lines that run across the screen, pomegranates sent in bubble mailers, obituaries. And then, when he has no other gifts to give, he gives you the gift of his words in the form of emails.

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My father's gifts always fell somewhere between selfish and eccentric. His obsession with the Civil War, the dated paintings of war scenes that hung from rich gold roping in his home's front and back parlors, led to many artifacts and gifts for my brother and me that were immediately placed on the antique bookshelf that stretched along the wall of his library. For Christmas each year, my brother and I would print off pages of wish lists complete with pictures and sizes for each item we asked my mother for. On Christmas morning, we would wake up at her home to presents spilling from beneath the tree. After opening all our new presents from our mom, she would drive us to our dad's for Christmas breakfast and more gifts. The quantity was similar—haphazardly wrapped presents and envelopes scattered beneath the large trees he

bought each year—but the contents puzzling. My father gave up the illusion of Santa Claus years before my mother, so he would place the presents under the tree as soon as he had wrapped them.

Though it was impossible to guess what the gifts would be—as they were sourced from thrift stores, estate sales, and my father’s personal archives—I often found myself digging under the trees so I could prepare an appropriate, pleased reaction come Christmas morning. One time he caught me shaking a small, rectangular shaped present. I was sure it was a VHS recording of my favorite movie at the time: *Bring It On*. My mother was strict about the shows and movies we could watch, but my father had satellite TV and let us rent movies when we stayed with him on weekends. When I rented *Bring It On* for the fifth or so time one weekend, I found my father upstairs sitting in front of the TV on the floor beside his dresser toggling between the rewind and stop buttons to record the movie over an old VHS tape. I told him I was sure of what was beneath the giftwrap, holding the present up for him to examine. He raised an eyebrow from behind the scratched, foggy lenses of his glasses as he sat in his armchair grading papers and told me not to be so sure of myself.

Come Christmas day, I reached for that package first, eager to prove him wrong. I ripped off the paper, but the VHS case had been stuffed with tie-dye socks and costume jewelry I had left around the house. I shook the contents out of the tape’s sleeve, unsure what had happened to the one gift I had been excited to receive. As I felt my throat closing up, he pulled the VHS from between the cushion of his favorite chair.

“Never make assumptions about the gifts you think you deserve, Mash. I taught you better than that,” he said.

He smiled over his lesson for the rest of the morning.

When I made the decision to cut off contact with my father during my freshman year of college, the gifts stopped. While I could once depend on finding at least one misshapen package with a quick note about the gift's significance in my apartment's mailbox every week, my father's presents became noticeably absent. My younger brother still kept in contact with our dad, perhaps plagued by the guilt of being the last one to give up on my dad and therefore isolating him entirely, perhaps clinging to some tenuous bond from the years my dad served as his soccer, t-ball, and baseball coach—the envy of all the kids whose parents hardly even made it to their games. With only one child to impress, my father's gifts to my brother became more extravagant: new basketball shoes purchased from the Finish Line at the mall instead of a garage sale, an offer to invite friends out for an unsupervised weekend at my father's northwestern Illinois summer cottage, a hundred dollar check “just because.” Meanwhile, birthdays of mine passed, many times without even a phone call.

Though I was away at college by then, the gifts for my brother seemed to come in on weekends I was home from school, and I couldn't help but wonder if my father was trying to punish me for not talking to him. *Look at all you could have had*, his gifts seemed to be telling me. I knew neither my brother nor I would have ever received anything as nice as the gifts my brother was now receiving if he was not trying to get revenge on me. Eventually my father must have tired of his game because his promises to treat my brother to a shopping trip for new school clothes or athletic gear turned into unanswered phone calls on the days they had planned to go.

My father began to trudge the path toward reconciliation with me years after I denied him contact, and so his gifts took a new form. He did not have a current address for me—I worried he would take a train from his home in the north suburbs into the city of Chicago to surprise me—and he knew I wouldn't answer his phone calls, so he began sending emails.

I think he sees the emails as gifts to me: monologues describing his latest accomplishments and how he has come so far in his life. In my father's emails, he excels in everything. He is an esteemed professor, a historian, a community preservationist, a marathon runner, a rescuer of stray dogs, a triathlete, a restorative expert, a master chef. Father of the year.

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Subject: The revamped Dad

I goof up- I am sorry. But you have too-Running away from me at the grocery store- Remember when the clerk-Phyllis? Got to know you so well she came to get me all the time to find you. Need I mention the BMT on the dashboard in Waucanda on the way to Galena? Guess that kinda pales in comparison.

Now that I am all cleaned up so to speak I remember so many things about you two great kids. I remember when you and I were in the back parlor -maybe you were two? And you heard a noise you couldn't identify and you would look at me and ask "what's zatt?" I would reaffirm you by telling you it was the wind which it always was. Another time I was hanging planters in the sunroom and you kept asking me about every two minutes "are you all done?" Because you wanted to play. You also had an expression "No boy" when you heard a guy talk. Do you also remember playing "Never Ending Stories?" I think I used to play "Professor Kleinfuss" or someone like that a bunch. You thought that was hysterical. I also remember coaching Conner in baseball when he was about 8-I had one guy who could lob the ball over the plate sometimes (CJ) He talked like a munchkin. And after about a week I said oh, crap this won't work because pitchers could only go three innings. So I said to your bro, I really need you to pitch! We went to Upton -you were the "umpire" and the kid threw about 70% strikes. And the rest is history as they say. Good stuff. RWB

I'm ten, and my dad, brother, and I are on our way to the summer house my dad bought and restored in the farmlands of northwestern Illinois. We stop at Subway to pick up food for the three-hour drive. My dad keeps black garbage bags with plastic jugs of vodka—a switch he made from wine after my mom moved out—in the back of his SUV where they roll around with the park district bats and baseballs. He tells us to go inside the restaurant while he pauses to open the trunk and rummage through it.

My brother and I study the menu, though I know what I want because my grandma always picks up Subway when she and I go to the pool. My mom still orders everything for my brother and me, and though my dad hates it, I'm too shy to order the sandwich myself.

I pull on the bottom of his Big Dogs t-shirt, damp with sweat because it's the middle of summer and he doesn't believe in wasting gas mileage on air conditioning.

"Can I get an Italian BMT?" I whisper.

He asks me to repeat myself.

"A BMT," I say.

My brother, three years younger and barely tall enough to look over the counter, orders for himself and I hate him for it. My dad thinks my mom babies us and now that my brother is talking to the man behind the counter and I refuse to, I'm sure my dad will call me a wimp when we get back to the car. I walk to the window before I start to cry. I'm sensitive and I wish I was with my mom this weekend, even though I love going to our vacation house, because she understands why I get upset.

When we get back to the car, my dad tosses the bag of sandwiches into the backseat where I'm sitting. I open mine and discover that the man made a BLT, a sandwich I love when my dad makes them with fresh tomatoes from his garden, but not one I wanted from Subway. I tell him the man made a mistake and ask him to turn around.

"Just eat that. You love BLTs," my dad says.

"But it's not what I wanted. Please. Turn around. We're not even far," I say.

"That's what you get for not ordering for yourself, Ash. Time to grow up."

I start crying, pleading with him to turn around or I will starve. He refuses—my tears do nothing to him. I take the sandwich out of the wrapper and throw it at the dashboard of the car. Mayonnaise smears across the console. Lettuce and tomato fly everywhere. My dad slams on the brakes, pulls off to the gravel and throws his door open. He screams at me then swears under his breath as he tosses the remnants of the sandwich onto the highway.

We do not turn around. I spend the rest of the ride crying in the backseat, lying down and cradling my grumbling stomach. It's the worst thing I've ever done to him.

Subject: Trivia for Tday

Who created the first "Thanksgiving" as a holiday? (Easy) BUT under what exact conditions, and what was the rationale for so doing, and the year? (Harder) If I now could type upside down for the answer, i would- BUT no Google allowed!

MY turkey was in the best three of all time- you shoulda come! I am going to see "Lincoln" (not in the milk cooler at Jewel) I think this weekend. I could meet you if you want to go- my treat....I could even bring a turkey sandwich? D

School lunches—sitting at the long wooden tables with orange and blue benches that folded up and were rolled up against the gym bleachers when it was not lunchtime. I dreaded Wednesdays since we stayed at our dad's on Tuesday nights. My friends ate salami and cheese sandwiches on white bread, Smuckers peanut butter and jelly Uncrustables, bags of Doritos, string cheese, Hi-C juice boxes, fruit roll ups. I peeled away the Velcro from one corner of my lunchbox—just enough to peek in or sniff at the contents of the bag. Big pieces of leftover fried chicken, a turkey sandwich made with scraps from the turkey he had cooked for dinner wedged between two halves of a Hawaiian roll, dented water bottles that had been on clearance, generic brand chips in the sort of plastic bags that you folded over because there was no way to seal them. Most times, I sat there until the end of lunch before quickly dumping everything into the trash.

Subject: Happy Memorial Day

Just a note to say hi- Have you worked on the Mangs/Tangs cat short story yet? I still think you would do a great job with it given your writing skills. You could change their names to hide their identities! Tho I love their names. Plus it has a lot of good elements to it in and of itself. Your first book which you could sign at Barnes and Noble! I also remember Hannah-who left home for about a week and about 2am we tried to wake you up to tell you she was back. She came back pregnant and had babies in the bathtub then we took them all to AAUW for show and tell. So there are some other good ideas! You could call it "Mangs, Tangs, and Hannah-a Catalogue"- Always Thinking-RWB

A hot night in late August. The streetlamps have been on for hours, but my mom and I are standing out in the driveway for some reason. She holds my baby brother. Perhaps my dad called and told us to wait there because when he drives up in his black Toyota Corolla, I'm sure he's not alone in the car. I make out a shadow of a small animal in his lap by the time he turns the corner off the busy main street and onto the smaller street that feeds into our driveway. He works as a professor, but spends his nights at the historical society near the park down the street from our house, restoring the building and its rooms to what they would've looked like when they were first built, much like he's doing with his own house.

When he stops the car and opens the door, there is an orange tabby cat in his lap. He picks her up and hands her to me.

"She's all yours," he tells me, "I found her in the floorboards while I was gutting one of the rooms at the historical society. She's lucky I was there to save her."

I name her Hannah—after my baby cousin. That night, I carry the cat into my canopied antique bed and lay her down on the pillow next to me. She purrs the whole night, kneading her front paws into my scalp.

Months later, I'm woken in the middle of the night to watch the cat give birth. We snap pictures of the births that, when developed, look more gruesome on film than in person. The porcelain claw-foot tub in the downstairs bathroom is streaked with blood, red as just-ripe strawberries. The kittens, slimy and gray, the color of uncooked sausage, paw blindly at the sides of the tub, unable to climb out. We tear down the old shower curtain and lay it across the bathroom floor so Hannah can nurse the kittens.

I'm not supposed to touch the kittens until they're old enough to open their eyes, but I sneak into the bathroom and hold them in the coming days.



We go on vacation weeks later. I want to bring Hannah and her kittens, but my dad tells me that Hannah knows how to take care of them on her own now. I spend the time at our summer home playing outside with the neighbor's daughter who is a few months older than me. We find a baby bird without a mother and build him a nest inside a shoebox we keep under the big pine tree in my front yard. The bird is weak and that night, I ask to bring him inside to keep him safe from the storm we are expecting. My mom worries that the bird will take flight in the house and we'll never be able to catch him so she tells me he must stay in his shoebox on the porch. I stay outside with him until I have to go to sleep. The rain on the sloped awning outside my bedroom window keeps me up all night. At the first sight of dawn, I run outside to be with the bird. His body is limp beside the nest in the shoebox. His feathers are soaked. We bury him beneath the wildflowers in the backyard.

When we return home, I walk through the two-story house looking for Hannah and her five kittens. The runt of the litter lays lifeless at the top of the back stairs near the office, her soft patches of fur matted with blood. She gets buried in the ivy under my bedroom window. I wonder if Hannah rejected her because I handled her too much. We give the rest of the kittens away.

Subject: Happy Valentine's Day, masher

Are you going out with the Justin Timberlake-looking guy? If not, do something special for yourself. My mom used to send me \$2 when I was at Vanderbilt on V-day to go to the bakery and buy a treat. Do that. On me.

My father sees a picture of me and the man I begin dating during my first year of graduate school and declares that he looks like Justin Timberlake. He met the first few boys I dated in high school and college, but after that I stop mentioning them to him altogether. I know that he will never remember any of these men, even those who stick around longer than most.

I accept that the extent of his input on the men I date will be which celebrities they remind him of. As my friends grow older and get into serious relationships, they worry about introducing their significant others to their fathers. The father's opinion is often the most important, but he's also the toughest one to earn approval from.

I will never have that problem. My father will never know the ways men treat or mistreat me. Even if he does, his reaction will remain the same. I am up for grabs: available to the highest bidder.

Subject: just a note.....

to say hi. Been asked to start writing a column on historic structures in Lake County.... Pay? Nada. But fun and also frustrating at times. Have a good (long) weekend- D

Assignment: (OK, always a professor)

Tell me how you see yourself in ten years. Think and wish. D

*How do I see myself in ten years?* Educated. In high school, I joked with friends that the only things worth anything that my father had given me were my intelligence and an innie bellybutton. When one of my friends told me the tradition of the father snipping the umbilical cord didn't actually have anything to do with how the cord fell off, my father was left with one thing I was willing to give him credit for. I'd help him grade papers for his college criminal justice courses as a kid, anxious for the day when, if ever, my intelligence would match his. It seemed the only way I was going to get his attention was by doing well in school.

When I started college and he filed a motion to fight my mom on their original agreement to split education costs in half, I was angry. I'd seen emails in his inbox between him and girls with college email addresses, negotiating the terms of their meetings. He was a college professor willing to give these girls thousands of dollars an hour in exchange for sex, but would continue to fight my mom for years over dollars-and-cents differences in child support. Still, I was determined to finish college without his financial support, and to continue my education. He'd

dropped out of his PhD program at University of Chicago months shy of finishing so I was going to beat him and finish my own.

In a relationship? Maybe. In a functional, healthy relationship? Less likely. The problem with having an alcoholic parent comes down to an issue of explanation versus excuse. My relationship with my father probably explains why I have a constant fear of abandonment, why I am so critical of myself and so forgiving of others, why I am sensitive to the point that when a boyfriend asked me what muscle groups I wanted to work out as we drove to the gym, I replied that I didn't know and began crying and told him that I didn't deserve to date him because I didn't know anything about exercise. What becomes more difficult is how much I can rely on that to excuse the things that happen in my relationships: my constant need for affection and recognition, my tendency to overanalyze everything to the point of arguing, my willingness to stay with someone who has cheated, lied, or disrespected me until I drive them crazy enough that they leave.

I continue to date men who I cannot seem to end things with no matter how many times they show me I do not matter. I continued to see my first boyfriend after he raped me, my second boyfriend after he pushed me down a flight of stairs while we were drunk off Bacardi or after he dragged me out of his car, onto the street, and took off, running over my foot in the process when I found messages from more girls on his phone. When he circled the block and returned, the neighbors who heard my sobs in the middle of the street called the cops. I told the audience that nothing happened, that I didn't want to press charges. I continued to date and sleep with a man even after I knew for certain he was still seeing a girl he began dating in high school. I got drunk and let a forty-seven-year-old man walk me home and pick me up, press me against the wall of my apartment, whisper dirty things to me. I snuck around on all of them—dated and

flirted and garnered attention from any man who was willing and able to give it to me, even just for a little while—well before they began to stray. I acted like the victim when they did.

I can think and wish all I want, but if I'm being realistic, my father has carved out a difficult path for me to get to where I want to be in the next ten years.

Subject: Happy New Year

Almost. Big year for you. Would love for you to come and see the Christmas decorations before they come down. House looks great. Vanderbilt is playing in a bowl game, of all things on New Year's Eve morning. Thinking of getting pizza, dips, hot cider. I think Conner is coming. RSVP. Dad.

Christmastime at my father's meant his antique house was transformed into something more beautiful than I had ever seen. The statues and fountain in the garden were laced with white string lights that sparkled beneath blankets of snow. Pine garland and maroon velvet bows draped along the winding staircase at the front of the house. Nutcrackers and vintage Santas and antique trains were in each room. One year I counted 5,418 ornaments in the boxes we kept filled with packing peanuts in the attic to be carried down to decorate for Christmas each year. The trees in the front parlor and back parlor were each over twelve feet tall, and decorated with red and green beaded garland, thousands of string lights, beautiful angel tree toppers, delicate ornaments. The tree on the landing at the top of the stairs was smaller—eight feet or so—and adorned in nothing but brass bugles: more than five hundred of them ordered in bulk and identical to one another. Stockings my father's grandmother knit hung from the marble mantle of the fireplace. A plate that read "Cookies for Santa," which also belonged to his grandmother, sat empty next to the hearth until Christmas Eve when he filled it with gingerbread men and Mexican Wedding cookies. Miniature villages—each house with its own light—were arranged in artificial snow atop the piano in the front parlor. We sprinkled reindeer dust—Cheerios and glitter—in the snow of the yard to direct Santa and his sleigh to our home.

When I am twenty-three I go to my father's house on Christmas day for the first time in over half a decade. Gone are the trees and houses and stockings and nutcrackers and Santa statues. Gone is the pile of presents beneath the tree and Christmas music playing from one of the channels on satellite TV. Gone is the nice China he used to serve fresh oranges and baked ham and homemade biscuits on Christmas morning. A few Christmas cards on the mantle from those he has managed to not lose entirely throughout the years is the only sign of the holiday.

Subject: graduation

I always knew you would do well and from what I have "heard" you are on to bigger things. Very hurt I wasn't given a least a "notice" of your accomplishment. Especially on the day it was designated. I've reached out. Many times. Dad.

I invite a man I have been dating during my last semester of college to my graduation rather than my father. The man declines to attend the ceremony, which is at a convention center in downtown Chicago at eight a.m., but he promises to meet my family and me for a celebratory lunch in the Southport Corridor—a neighborhood on the north side where we both work—afterward.

My family and I pose for pictures, stop for a couple Bloody Marys, before we make our way to lunch. The man never shows, though he texts me continually throughout the meal, insisting that he is on his way with flowers for my mom and me. He says that he wants to earn her approval, to let her know that I am in good hands with him. I already know that our relationship is not one with potential to last, especially since I will be moving to Florida at the end of the summer and because I know that he is still dating his high school girlfriend, but I couldn't help but get wrapped up in the idea that he would show up that day. That he would take my father's place and tell me how proud he was of me and make me glad I chose him over family.

Subject: Que esta

su addresso(I made that up) nuevo? Do you remember in Lake Geneva- I asked room service for two more "pelotas?" You two were so impressed- but "pelotas" means balls, not pillows!- Kinda close! Miss you.....D

who knows....your dad may come to surprise you. But what about what "we" used to call a "care" package? I could send a REALLY good meatloaf! Know how you loved that!!!!  
Hudson says hi to the cats.....BTW- did you like him? A rescue- EVERYONE wanted him. D

THX. MEATLOF coming!

I have been asked to be a "ghost actor." in the cemetery walk on 9/22 in Waukegan. So, if you'd like to come.....Have no clue what I will be doing.

Also there is a play at the Schornick theatre in Bowen coming up I'd like to see. "A Few Good Men." I'll spring for the tickets if you also want to bring someone? It's the last week of Sept and the first week of October. D

The first time that my high school boyfriend, Tyler, and I break up, it is the spring of my junior year. I spend that season wrapping my arms in medical bandages and wearing trench coats to cover the cuts I gave myself when I realized I no longer held his affections. I am seeing a psychologist each Thursday after school, though he does little more than ask me the same questions about where I work and what classes I am taking each week. My father buys tickets to see *Chicago* at the Genessee Theater: a historic theater down the street from his house that has just been renovated. He intended to give the tickets to Tyler and me for our one-year anniversary, but since we are broken up, my father proposes that he accompany me to the show.

*Chicago* is one of my favorite musicals and one of the many movies my father let me watch as a child that my mother would have disapproved of, so I agree to our date at the theater in hopes it will take my mind off Tyler, if only for a few hours. My father forgets to make dinner reservations—used to the forlorn businesses and restaurants that occupied downtown before the theater reopened—so we must sit at a high-top table, the last available, near the bar at one of the new bistros downtown. The waiter informs us that we are only allowed to eat the buffet food and that we cannot order off the menu because of the show that night. For some reason my father equates *buffet* with *free* and tries to convince me to leave without paying.

Before that, he broaches the subject of me and Tyler, asking me about the break-up in his slurred dialect. He leans across the table, rubs my legs with his hand, tells me how beautiful I am. I am terrified of what he may do so I open my purse and throw some bills on the table myself. I wait for him outside. There is a lump in my throat the rest of the night while we watch women in fishnets and black bodysuits glide across the stage.

Subject: Tragic

You have now chosen to cut yourself off from me- and my entire family. But you now have. Thought "divorce" was the "Johnston" way. NO ONE in my family (300 years) has ever been divorced- except me. Looks like you inherited that, plus your mother's (diagnosed) borderline personality issues. Submarine sandwich (BMT!) on the Toyota windshield going out to Galena- stuff. Right outside Wauconda. On Route 176 Anger. At what? What a memory. Too bad. Really. I love you dearly. Who knows what things you are getting from your mother, and her "friend." Remember that "he's just my friend" scam-? YEARS before she decided to move out. And then take you to the wonderful, and conveniently set- up apartment across from "her friend" on North Avenue.? Wow. A miraculous turn of events. Ash, the things I could tell you- but I shan't. I know A LOT about those days. Took a bit of an effort, but I did get the truth. Killed me to learn it.

I screwed up in my life subsequently. Big time. BIG time. I paid a huge price. I asked you to forgive me. At least I do not live in a prolonged lie. Nana is dead. So is Papa Herman. So is Nana Johnston. Also Herman's mother. No one in your mom's existing family speaks, fighting over money. Never see each other, even on holidays, though they all live nearby. Not normal.

Our family, if you consider yourself in it still, though wracked with grief since Carolyn's death, in 2004, and mom and Homer's declining health, recently, is closer than ever. Talk to everyone every few days. May you learn the importance of the concept of "family." I did when my dad died when I was 13. Conner has. Why not you?

Continue to shut me out if you will- plus shut out my family. Same thing. Grow into the future that your mom has. No family concept. Divorce. Being a "single mom," which she told me was her goal in a vivid discussion in our front hall in 2000. Was a Sunday- picking you guys up. I "rehearsed" the talk in my head all weekend. Pleaded with her to work things out- A thousand times. (See-told ya- a memory.) NOT to be critical. But I am comfortable in "my skin." NOW. If you want to write back, write back.... if not.... not. I love you. Dad

On the drives to school he talks badly about my mother.

“She was too young—twenty years of difference—not ready to give up her partying ways. Didn’t want to settle down with me,” he tells my brother and me as he swerves through traffic.

Post-it notes cover her face in the family portrait over the fireplace that we had done at our church for the parish directory. Sometimes they are blank, other times “bitch” and “whore” are written in his uppercase scrawl.

One of the times that he gets drunk and forgets that he picked my brother up from school, my mom calls him to tell him he can't drive us anymore. This causes him to get drunk all over again and drive across town to our ranch. My mom's boyfriend is in the yard, getting ready to take our chocolate lab on a walk.

My father stumbles out of the car, spits on the ground. When his eyes focus on my mom's boyfriend, he scoffs.

“How cute, a dog holding a dog,” he says and spits again before speeding off.

I wonder how he must feel when he looks at me. In so many ways, my mother and I are identical: deep, golden brown eyes, red-brown hair, small features, tall. We're both sensitive and obsessive and people-pleasing and over-analytic. It must be hard for him to sort out the anger he has toward her and the anger he has toward me when he sees the same thing when he looks at us.

Subject: (no subject)

can't believe it! From Schapville to Florida. I am POSITIVE the cats are happier with you! Hudson and I (my Irish Setter) have survived the winter, tho it has been a bear. I can't walk him on the streets- for obvious reasons- people don't keep up with shoveling the sidewalks... I have a gorgeous 600 sq ft fenced in garden area in back (I know it seemed like we had no "back." Built it last summer. Lattice/cedar and wrought iron Victorian fence- Arbor Vitae-perennials. Porch which Conner helped me with. I "think" I "borrowed" some of the neighbor's yard- tho I did talk with him! I was thinking....the way your (his) yard (and house) looks...do you really care? Was just THINKING it. Didn't SAY it. But you know me!  
. Love, D

The area near my father's house has a lot of Hispanic influence. Once an area of the north shore as well-respected and wealthy as Lake Forest or Evanston, Waukegan grew downtrodden as historic houses were turned into tenements and immigrants flocked to the area, which was known for its cheap rent. The houses that border my father's property are rented by



large Hispanic families who throw parties constantly. Growing up, it seemed that there was a party every weekend, which stretched into the early hours of the morning. The families placed slabs of wood on cinderblocks in the backyard to make room for their extended family and other party attendees. They strung lights across the clotheslines and hung piñatas from the trees at the corners of the property. Smoke billowed out from the grills that burned all through the day and Mexican music played over a boom box that was set on a picnic table. I watched the men and women dance together and laugh and sing and drink, though eventually I grew tired and angry that they carried on so long into the night. Some nights the men of the family stayed up sipping tequila beneath bedazzled cowboy hats and one of them produced a handgun from his light-wash jeans. They took turns aiming, pretending to fire, but sometimes they were so drunk that they actually did. The windows of my father's back porch became riddled with bullet holes over the years. He never said anything to them, and it always bothered me because I wondered what would happen if my brother or I happened to be in that back room while they took target practice. We knew better, though. We always stayed out of the back porch during their parties.

Though I hated them for the way they carried on and left trash in their backyards for weeks after the party, there was something admirable in the way they were so open about their drinking and carrying on. If only they knew the secrets that our house contained.

Subject: Hudson

got me up at his usual 3am. Found out there was a "relay" yesterday by the house at 7. So, went to bed, joined in. 6.2 miles, tho most just did 1/4 of that. Hey..as long as I was up. Can feel it a bit more than in 1983- my first marathon- also with NO training. I am "Peter Pan" or an idiot.

Subject: OK, good thing

I am so young. Shoveled last nite at midnite. Winds off the lake blew 12" of snow back on our 230 ft. of sidewalk. Shoveled again. Do you remember when I ran a marathon for you/Greg in 1991? As in 26.2 miles? Your mom kept meeting us on the way...My left knee killed me at mile 17. But I made it! Good lesson in there. But my knee hurt for two months. You were at the other end. Greg was getting cured of cancer. And he is cured. Story in there for you, my favorite writer. Several. D

Following the divorce, we'd run a lot of races. My father got to keep us overnight every Saturday so he'd make a big pasta dinner and we would go to sleep early to get up for races on Sunday. I had never been much of a runner, and we never trained for the races, so my dad and brother always left me behind pretty quickly.

They ran side-by-side the whole time, my brother in his favorite t-shirt with a cartoon picture of the pandas at the San Diego Zoo that my dad had bought him when we visited his family in California. The shirt hung almost to his knees and when my brother got tired, my dad would pick him up and put him on his shoulders. As they neared the finish line together, my brother would lift up the end of his shirt and drape it over my dad's eyes, laughing as my father began to spin circles, pretending he didn't know where the finish line was. Eventually, I joined them though I ran hundreds of yards behind.

I think we mostly did the races for the coupon books the sponsors handed out at the end. We'd spend the rest of the day eating free appetizers or go-carting as my father carefully tore coupons from the perforated pages: his own form of currency.

I knew my father was older than most fathers of the kids at my school—he had been over forty when I was born, but he seemed to be in good shape. He was tall and lean and his legs, though thin and bruised from the falls he would take on the stairs late at night, were muscular and carried him with ease through the races and sports practices. Once on the way to school, his Trooper ran out of gas so he and my brother laced on the baseball cleats they kept in the trunk and ran to the nearest gas station to fill the gas can. I sat in the car on the side of the road and waited for them to return. Twenty minutes later, I saw them running across a barren field, their knees reaching high to their chests as they struggled to keep the spikes in their shoes from digging into the muddy earth. My dad held the gas can out at arm's length. It swayed with each

leap and they looked like they were dancing across the cornfield. Later, my dad compared their journey to the prisoners running away in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which was his favorite movie that year.

Subject: Hi Ash

Seriously, Ashley, I want to re-create our relationship around new and good things. Cleaning and organizing the house I am sure is symbolic of re-starting my life and you as well as your brother need to be a huge part of that and also help me do that. Going through all of the family pictures and all brought back a ton of really great memories, but it was also at times difficult to absorb all the emotions involved. The house looks great-I am working a ton on it as well as writing-two books-based on my teaching at the collegiate level for forty years(yikes) and speculating about the future of higher education as we move through the 21st century. I could use your thoughts on it. I am also writing about the history of various elements of American life, and further researching the life of Moses Evans and family, whom I found out last night had a one year old son who died the year the house was built, then, as you know, fought in the Civil War with Grant through the South (Chattanooga and Chickamauga-we visited those places I think when you were one and a half), then went with Sherman to Atlanta to essentially end the war. How fitting that I have that print of Sherman with his autograph in it-the one I brought to St. Pat's for my talk with your class in fifth grade.

I miss you. I want us to work on "us." It's been way too long and your dad, while "young," (and in great health I found out yesterday with my physical) still is 62 and I want to reconcile any problems we may have. But I obviously need you to do that with me.

In fifth grade we finally get to the history unit on the Civil War, which I have been waiting for since I have been learning and reading about the Civil War for years. My father comes in as a guest speaker. He is in professor mode, which is a version of him I don't usually see except for the rare occasions when I accompany him to his college classes in Chicago. He is all knowledge and facts. He brings with him the painting of *Sherman's March to the Sea* that hangs in our back parlor, as well as the Civil War backpack that he gave my brother and me as a gift the Christmas before. He brings other small Civil War artifacts and passes them around the classroom. Though most of the kids find our history class with Mrs. Placko boring, they love my dad's presentation and spend the rest of the day telling me how cool they thought it was. It's the first time I can remember being proud of my father without any hint of embarrassment or shame.

Subject: Up late

shoveled 3 times today- Up to 80" snowfall. I also do the neighbors-.So after shoveling around midnight, I

just take care of their drive and walks. They think I am God's gift.

I need some advice. I am totally happy- life way organized. Doing writing. My gorgeous Setter is right by my side. It's good.

I have a very close friend- from Milwaukee- 1972(Debbie). Brilliant. Very successful. Artist. Owned and sold companies. Lives near Beverly Hills. I think I told you a bit about her. She lives in LA. WITH her 28 year old (not impaired!) son. Never had a job. Spoiled to death. Divorce with her husband a long time ago...Question: Pretty serious heroin addict (her son) Lives with his mom-AND girlfriend-free. In Deb's house. I have consulted a ton of people, incl professionals. You are "about" his age-but SO different. I value your advice. Conner is up to date with this- PLS keep this between you and me- meaning not mom- or her boyfriend. I just want to know how to approach- tried a gazillion ways. Me- asking you-for advice. remember this day. That's how much I respect you. Dad

I am finally my father's equal when he asks me for advice on how to handle his girlfriend's heroin-addicted son. It is a moment I have waited for since I was old enough to know that the best way to earn his attention was to read and learn as much as I could, so we could forget our roles as father and daughter and just talk: the causes of the Civil War, ways the Titanic could have been saved from the iceberg, how to improve upon the rules of baseball.

The irony of him asking for my help with someone else's addiction is obvious. Any advice I could give him stems from my years of experience with his addiction. But I don't have anything to share. I'm still trying to figure it all out myself.

Subject: Any thoughts on your move?

I will miss the cats-actually they have "grown" on me! I can tell they missed me due to my screw-ups. But they will be happy with you guys and they ARE great cats. Good thing I raised them as "dogs" as you told me once-they listen. They never go outside. They don't have claws so they don't scratch anything and if you keep their box clean they don't pee! Perfect. Plus they are sisters and families are irreplaceable. Couldn't resist that comment.

I get up thinking about you and Conner. Going to bed earlier and getting up earlier totally miss you. Tangs is rubbing against me now and I guess that means "hi" tho I could never figure out what "meow" meant. Did you? I am good running-reading and enjoying life-great actually. The cats will be happy with you. Tho I will miss them. I think i took great care of them. Remember when we took them to the vet and they had tons of lice in their ears? Yikes Hope you didn't miss my message about family. I will always love your mom and for giving me my two great kids. I should tell her that more and I promise I will. She is good.

I remember you and Nana used to go through her yard and "pick" weeds on Ash Street. She was a really nice person and I miss cooking Thanksgiving with her-and you also-you made a great fruit salad. Opened up a real old copy of the food magazine I used to cook from every month. Inside was a file card, in your writing. I think from Thanksgiving one year. It read "Ashley's Fruit Salad."-Cut apples pears and oranges

into pieces. Put in a bowl. Serve." Kinda simple! Remember? Off to lunch at a cafe in Waukegan with a book. I have been "talking" with the cats about their journey from the bushes in Schapville. I am sure we saved their lives because all of the other cats from that litter got killed by cars. (remember the neighbor Tina who cleverly named them Midnight and Ashes?) to Waukegan where Mangs hung around my neck while I drove, to Lincoln Park. I think they are ready to experience the big city.

Subject: the cats are getting excited

they have been SO well behaved since I got back. I told you that Mangs looks so much better and has put on some weight. I really think all that rubbing and matted hair was because she missed me. They both are so sweet. BUT you have to remember they can NEVER be let outside. They never go out here because I trained them not to. But in Chicago they may be confused at first and want to come back here. 40 miles is a long way to go! But I know you will take really good care of them. Spoil them every now and then with some canned food. They love that and they will share a can. When they get in your way, as they sometimes do, just say "move" and they scoot. I want "visitation rights" with them. Here or there!

Subject: one more note

I also missed myself besides you and Conner and the cats. but I am back-totally. Just thought I would share that with you. I will work things out with your mom. Promise. She gave me two great kids and I will love her for that always. I told you that. Remember? Music and banjos and poetry forever. Dad.

In the weeks before I move into my first apartment, my father and I email a lot. He is at an inpatient rehab facility in one of the wealthier north suburbs and is eager to offer me furniture and other items for my place. After he served a month in jail, his brother flew in from California to convince my dad to go to rehab and get his affairs in order. The house my father once spent all his free time restoring had been neglected for years as had the cats that we rescued from a farm near our vacation house one Father's Day weekend years before. We found piles of hardened food that the cats had thrown up, skeletons of mice in at least half of them. The water bowl the cats used was a large one recycled from the greyhounds we had once adopted, but instead of water, the cats lapped at a pool of their own urine, flecked with litter and bugs from the paws they used to test the depth of the bowl. I let him know that I would be taking the cats as soon as I had somewhere to put them. At first he seemed relieved—the cats had been my idea and the responsibility for them had fallen on him once my brother and I stopped visitation with my father, but as the date we set for me to pick them up neared, he seemed regretful.

The first time I visited him at rehab, he tried to bring my brother and me to the visitor's room without signing us in.

"Those rules aren't in place for people like me," he told us, "everyone here thinks I'm so smart. They all call me 'professor' and stop in my room to borrow books and listen to lectures."

He'd been forced into retirement from the university where he had taught for more than thirty years the year before after missing too many classes or showing up smelling of vodka and berating the students when they refused to participate. Maybe he just missed having people listen to him.

"The people here are seriously messed up, guys. Promise me you'll never be anything like them," he told my brother and me.

Another time, I drove out to take him for a physical. I had to fill out extensive paperwork taking legal responsibility for bringing him directly to his appointment and back. As soon as the facility was out of sight, my father insisted we stop at the gas station so he could fill my tank to thank me for driving him. When we got to the gas station, he told me he needed to get change. He headed inside while I was at the pump. He hadn't returned by the time I was finished so I went in to look for him, but he wasn't there. I called my mom, unsure what else to do.

"I knew he'd pull something like this. He's drinking, I'm sure. And you're liable. You never should have told him you'd pick him up," she said.

Ten minutes later, he reappeared beside the car. I was sure he had been drinking, too, though I didn't smell anything on him. I imagined him submitting to a blood test when we returned to the rehab facility and me being dragged away in handcuffs for enabling his addiction.

Still, in the weeks before he was released, I let myself barely hope that he would get better. He seemed more lucid, more optimistic, than he had been in years.

During the last week of my freshman year of college, I employ the help of the boy I had just begun dating to take the cats from my father. When I asked for help, I wasn't sure if I meant help with transporting the two cats or help dealing with my father, but he agreed nonetheless. In the days leading up to the visit, my father emailed me often, alluding to his excitement that I would be taking Mango and Tango with me to my first apartment.

When my boyfriend and I drive from our dorm on the north side of the city to my father's house in Waukegan, the early summer sun is just going down. We walk the wrap-around porch, pungent with a fresh coat of light blue paint since his return from rehab, and I push the large wooden door to let us in. My father is standing in the front hall awaiting my arrival, but it takes a few moments for him to react to the opening of the door. When he turns to face us, his bright blue eyes are shaky with tears and drunkenness.

His voice comes out in hushed slurs: the same sadness I heard years before while he watched the scene in *Field of Dreams* that reminded him of playing catch with his own father before his early death. I know he has already started drinking again, and that he will not remember meeting this boy I have brought with me. The room is quiet aside from the staccato sobs of my father. I turn my attention to gathering the cats, feeling sorry for my boyfriend whose lanky figure stands at the foot of the staircase, hands in pockets. I offer him one of the cats so he can busy himself with stroking her matted fur in our last moments in this house.

I ask my father to say goodbye to Mango and Tango as my tears turn the scene around me as blurry as his drunkenness must have. He picks up the smaller of the two, cradling her in his arms and pressing the pink and black pad of her paw against his lips.

"I'll miss you, Mangs. You've been so good to me," he says.

We leave him alone in the stillness of the house without saying goodbye ourselves, the sharp sounds of his cries and the names of the cats being screamed reaches all the way to the ceiling thirty feet overhead.

That night, he loses his balance, or perhaps he throws himself, I'm not sure, down the winding mahogany staircase at the front of the house. Though he breaks his C1 vertebrae, his hand, and several other vertebrae along his spine, he manages to climb back up the two flights of stairs, perhaps clinging to the ridged spindles that support the curved railing, and into his bed where he falls asleep for twelve hours. When he wakes, he calls his friend who lives around the corner to drive him to the hospital where he spends the next four months.

Later that week, while the cats are still tiptoeing about the new space of my apartment, bodies hovering the floor in a near-crawl, my mother calls to tell me that my father fell down both flights of stairs at the front of his house. I am surprised because he has fallen plenty of times, usually on the back steps, but his injuries have never placed him in the hospital.

“When did it happen?” I ask.

“Sometime last week. He went back to bed after it so it's hard to tell exactly when,” my mother says.

When my uncle flies in from San Diego for the second time that year, though, we meet him for lunch to discuss the next steps, not knowing that my father will be kept in a coma for the next two weeks, but that he will emerge from that strong as ever—only three months spent in physical rehab with a medical halo screwed into his skull before he will return home without so much as a scar.

“I just don't want you to feel guilty. You have to know it was going to happen anyways. It's not just because you were there that night to get the cats,” my uncle says.



“What?”

Next to me, my mom shakes her head.

As soon as I heard the news, I knew it happened that night. My mom, knowing my tendency to overanalyze and blame myself for everything, chose not to tell me because she knew I would feel responsible. She must have forgotten to tell my uncle the same thing.

Subject: slept

thought about "creative non-fiction." Story of my (our) life. We all "major" in that! That time I jogged to St Therese- 6 miles-no reason- then to be in that room...thinking about Papa Herman in that silly hospital gown in the corner-you held my left index finger for the first time. Taking you home. I had a big "stork" in the front yard. I drove that little Nissan Sentra about 15 mph because I was so afraid of my "package." My package turned out GREAT. D

My dad tells his family that I'm getting my Masters in journalism at University of Florida: misremembered fragments of conversations he and my brother have in my absence. He picks up on the phrase "creative nonfiction" as a part of my email signature on one of the rare occasions I answer him. He has never read any of my nonfiction writing.

As a kid, I started writing plays. At first they were a way to pass time at my babysitter's house or family parties. I'd draft quick skits and have the other kids perform them for the adults at the end of the day. In first grade, I transferred schools and both of the first grade classes took two weeks out of our curriculum to rehearse the play and build the set. That summer, we performed another play at the community theater. My plays had very few spoken lines—the majority of them were read by an offstage narrator. I always chose my father for this role because he was the smartest person I knew, and he could read and record the play at the same time so we could watch it later. After the play at the community center, we hosted a reception in the picnic area outside the theater. Shortly after the reception began, I started to feel sick and came down with a serious fever. My father picked me up and draped me over his shoulder to walk back to the car. He carried a director's chair that one of my classmate's fathers had made

me in his other hand. The denim jumper my mom bought me for the day was hot and scratchy against my clammy skin. I waved to my classmates and their parents as they shrank in my field of vision. When my father set me down beside the Corolla to unlock the doors, I swore I could hear them all clapping for me.

The creative nonfiction tag means my dad now sends me ideas for stories all the time: the way I grabbed his index finger on the day I was born. The marathon he says he ran for me. Recently, he told me that he went for a run and ended up at the hospital where I was born. Every wing besides the psych ward has been closed so the building is largely abandoned, but he said he was wandering the empty hallways and happened upon the room where I was born. He was sure of it.

“Write that story,” he tells me, “write about the day you were born.”

I want to tell him it doesn't work like that, at least not for me, but who am I to tell him what to remember? A story is what defines us—the ones we remember, the way we tell them.

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