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UGLY, ODD, AND GORGEOUS

By

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Thesis

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ABSTRACT TEMPLATE

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Ugly, Odd, and Gorgeous is a collection of excerpts from a longer, in-progress work of nonfiction that explores the valences of home, family, and the places we find them.

Introduction

Last night, I stood in my backyard with my dog, contemplating Death. I hung a cigarette in the corner of my mouth, accepting another failed attempt to drop the habit I picked up as a teenager in Montana. I lit the smoke, and turned a line over in my head, *I have never known a God, but I do know Death*. I chuckled at my own hubris and set about pacing in a track of hardened snow—another habit—trying to pin down my ideas about death and dying. I was sorting through my childhood with a mom who prosecuted child abuse and homicide cases for the state and a long-gone stepfather who was a forensic pathologist and who sometimes preferred to bring his work home with him. I paced as traffic ripped along the interstate snaking through the north side of my otherwise docile Missoula neighborhood. A semi-truck's air brakes hissed and its tires growled. Then, a break in the traffic and a void of quiet, winter calm.

I heard the owls before Ollie, my Labrador mutt following me as I trudged back and forth. The owls, perched somewhere down the block, were calling to each other in the unmistakable, gentle hoots children are taught to associate with them.

I stopped and Ollie froze, pointing with his front paw for a moment while the black fur along the ridge of his back sprang to attention. He sprinted towards the fenced corner of the yard and the owls, his cannon-fire bark booming. This is the same dog who yelps if he goes too long without a belly rub and, earlier that evening, met a rabbit in the yard and didn't try to eat it. Instead, Ollie had walked up to the fear-frozen rabbit and licked it on the nose. He knelt, making himself smaller, and licked the rabbit again. The rabbit tore away from him and shot under the fence, and Ollie whined at another botched opportunity to make a new friend.

I called Ollie back from his misplaced attempts to also befriend the owls down the street and herded him inside. Back on the porch, I listened. Ollie hadn't scared them off, and the owls still called back and forth. For a moment, I wondered what they were saying to each other. Do owls even communicate in that way? I didn't know. They were owls, though. I was sure of it. I asked myself what kind they were, then chided myself for not having an answer. This was a holdover from the nine years I spent in Seattle, where people find out you're from Montana and expect you to be a walking wildlife encyclopedia for the Rocky Mountains. People from 'the city,' whether it be Seattle or somewhere even more removed, like New York, are always curious when I tell them where I grew up.

"Yes," I say. "I did own firearms as a teenager, but, no, I did not ride my horse to school."

Sure, there is a law in the state that dictates any public school must provide food and board to any student's horse. In some of the more rural counties, that may still be common practice. But, in Billings, the town of 100,000 people where I grew up, it was just good for the occasional laugh. Although, when I was in high school, there was a girl who rode her quarter horse to school as a stunt to celebrate the end of her senior year. Principal Cobb, warned of the plan, made a show of acknowledging the law and greeted her at the front doors with small piles of hay scattered around his feet. A crowd gathered, but then some sophomore stomped the gas in his Honda Accord and screeched through the parking lot, spooking the horse and throwing the rider. She fractured her skull on the concrete. Principal Cobb stood, holding the reins at a cautious distance for almost an hour after the ambulance left, until the girl's father arrived and trailered the nervous horse. The

girl was in high spirits when she came back to school the following week, that time in her car. My own equestrian career, only a few months long, ended when I was ten years old and the horse I was riding bolted, leaving me with a mouthful of dirt and the growing realization that I wasn't cut out to ride anything that didn't come standard with mechanical brakes.

My relationship with horses, or lack thereof, is one of the many disclaimers I make to others when they ask hackneyed questions about Montana. Yes, I've seen rattlesnakes. No, I've never shot a moose. Yes, I've eaten fried bull testicles, charmingly known as Rocky Mountain oysters. No, I don't know how to line dance because they don't really do that there. Yes, I have spent time on ranches exploring the good ol' open range, but, no, I've never herded sheep. Often, open spaces were a proving ground where my friends and I could test another haphazard invention. For example, our six-foot potato cannon—cobbled together with spare PVC and fueled by the combustion of Aqua Net hairspray—could strip the bark off a stump with an Idaho russet at 20 yards until it was confiscated by a bored highway patrol officer one afternoon. Still, there's a lingering mysticism about the place where I grew up—the kind of mysticism that makes people think any true Montana boy should be able to identify the species, sex, and approximate age of an owl by its midnight call. Some of the people from my home play these misconceptions to their advantage, deploying their experiences from the “last best place” as a form of social currency to inflate what I call rugged credibility.

When I was living in Seattle, the married couple in the apartment above mine were friends from home. We went to the same high school and, although they were in a peripheral social circle, we did spend a lot of time together as teenagers. Toward the end

of my time in Seattle, we'd grown further apart, but we still shared the occasional beer at a bar down the street called, of course, Montana Bar. The neon sign in the window glowed purple with the outline of our home state. The walls were a collage of scarred road signs and wooden trailhead markers in someone's bold but inaccurate take on a rural dive bar. Behind the bar itself, the Moose Drool Brown Ale tap handle was displayed with pride. That was the extent of the bar's association with home. But, if we were with someone who wasn't from Montana, my friends from Montana used the signs around the room as a convenient segway to talk about their outdoor prowess. They recalled hiding in a cave, waiting out a summer thunderstorm that interrupted their hike up to Mystic Lake, a hike that somehow seemed to grow longer and more brutal with every iteration. This was a bolster of that rugged credibility in a bar that was nothing like where we grew up.

Instead, I grew up about a mile past the last traffic light on my side of town, where the main road turns to highway and street signs turn to deer crossings. Just after that last traffic light, a battered piece sheet metal pocked with dents from drive-by marksmen wielding pellet guns promises a municipal but stop. Though, in the ten years I lived there, I don't recall ever seeing a MET bus that far west, past the senior living homes, elementary school, and where the sidewalk turns to gravel frontage road. My neighborhood was a black asphalt blister on the hide of Billings, bulging against the sandstone Rimrocks and into the folds of tan earth radiating from beneath.

There wasn't a defined border where the asphalt stopped and the dust began. Beyond my house, empty cul-de-sacs blossomed with the promise of new neighborhoods—the relentless march of suburban progress into the wasteland where the breeze rolled tumbleweeds and the air turned to sandpaper on windy afternoons. West of

where I grew up, a golden Moroni perched atop the plaster white steeple of an LDS church, blowing his trumpet while surrounded by a spiked metal fence to keep kids like me from wandering too close or, Heaven forbid, beyond the spotless glass of the double front doors. There was a country club and an attached golf course kept green and trim as long as the fire season didn't call for water rations. Just after we moved to Billings, I took a golf lesson at the Yellowstone Country Club. I don't remember much about golf, but I can still smell the water hazards, brown and bottomless with water diverted from the irrigation ditches that ran through the neighborhood next to mine. I favored those ditches over the driving range. Along those ribbons of agricultural runoff, I combed the grass for garter snakes or a rare yellow-speckled salamander lazing in the shallows.

In my neighborhood, we didn't have streetlights or sidewalks, but we had paved roads, some fenced yards, and a surplus of vinyl siding. The houses were dense enough to pull a decent haul of candy on Halloween, though sometimes we ran out of houses and knocked on the same door twice, hoisting our bulbous pillow cases in the air, hoping for another handful of Starburst before we stood out as distinct from the ten other werewolves, doctors, or bloodied ghosts trick or treating that night. Summer evenings were thick with the smell of lighter fluid and charcoal briquettes from backyard barbeques and the buzz of lawnmowers accompanied most Saturday afternoons. The neighborhood Avon representative, Terry, lived three houses down from ours. When we moved from Iowa, I didn't expect barbeques or the advertisements for wrinkle cream Terry left in our mailbox twice a month. At that time, I was known to my family as "Shewiff Butcrack," a nickname inspired by the two years I spent wearing a set of popgun revolvers like an extra appendage, my chronic inability to keep my jeans hiked

up, and the speech impediment that I wouldn't iron out for another few years. I wanted Montana to fulfill my daydreams of the old west—teepees, saloons, and shootouts. Instead, our mailbox was just one in a long row of mailboxes, next to a driveway that was just another stem of concrete sprouting from Palisades Park Drive.

“We would eat meat,” one from the married couple said, glancing around the Montana Bar. “But, only if we knew where it came from and how it was killed. Where we grew up, game meat is everywhere. You just can't find it out here.”

I neglected to mention one of the many recent times they had declined my offer for a bite of fresh kokanee I'd caught that afternoon, or a few fillets from the cooler full of walleye I sometimes brought back from midwestern fishing trips with my father. I don't take issue with vegetarianism, but I have hard time resisting the occasional prod when it comes to high noses and even higher horses. I couldn't always resist renewing my offer for fresh caught fish.

“I've never seen you fish,” was a common response, as if to validate the idea that, if neither one of them had ever actually *seen* me cast for a rising trout or drift a Lindy rig, it must be impossible. My other favorite, a response meant to murder my rugged credibility instead of wounding it, was, “you're from Iowa, aren't you?”

I am from Iowa, as much as anyone who was born there and moved to Montana when they were 6 years old. And, it's true, they had never seen me fish. When I was growing up, I cherished the fishing trips I took with my father when I visited him in Iowa. But, that's where it was accessible. My mom and my childhood stepfather didn't share the same enthusiasm for angling, and fly rods are expensive. To the chagrin of my

“true” Montana friends, I didn’t even learn how to properly cast a fly until I was in my 20s, and it was in crowded, metropolitan Seattle. I expected my credit to improve when I told the couple I had accepted an offer to attend graduate school in Missoula and I’d be moving back to the state they seemed to take such a socially convenient pride in. Instead, they scoffed.

“Don’t get stuck there like everyone else who never left,” one said.

The idea that my move was a choice never floated to the surface of our conversation. I couldn’t explain my hope that, maybe, I’d find something new in a town several hundred miles from where we grew up. That, maybe, it felt alright to be going home, as odd, ugly, and gorgeous as that place can be. I do know that I never heard owls from the back porch of my Seattle apartment and, last night, it was a welcome sound between bursts of interstate traffic, even if I didn’t know what kind of owls they were.

When I was growing up, it was rare to actually see an owl. I’ve only seen one once, when my best friend and I glimpsed a barn owl roosting in one of the stunted trees dotting the sandstone cliffs behind my childhood home. Sometimes I’d hear them, but more often I’d just find the pellets they left behind.

Towards the end of high school, my girlfriend and I spent the day in Bozeman, two hours west of Billings. That afternoon, we were wandering around the abandoned train depot and she found an owl pellet. With the same sense of curiosity that would eventually pull her out of Montana and into the field of microbiology, she picked up the large, dried out ball of vomit. It was about the size of an egg, and crumbled as she split it open.

“This is so cool,” she said, as her fingers worked to expose the skull of a mouse. “You can see what the owl has been eating.”

She uncovered the rest of the mouse, brushing off tufts of its partially digested fur. I leaned in as she held it up, examining it in the afternoon sun. It wasn't the first time I'd seen something dead, but it was the first time I'd ever thought about it coming out of something else. For all their cultural majesty, owls are raptors. When children learn about owls, they're told about the bird's unique ability to turn its head all the way around, or their soft, warm hoot. Most children's books, though, don't talk about how owls can scream, or how their phenomenal eyesight and sensitivity to light allow them to divebomb prey in the middle of the night, puncturing flesh with razor talons and swallowing their kill whole, bones and all, if it's small enough. It's rare to even see an owl, let alone one with blood on its beak.

In my backyard, I listened to the owls a while longer. Then, a truck engine roared awake on the other side of the street. It was one of the neighbors' clients that stopped by throughout the week, each driving some variation of old Ford or Chevy with a monstrous V8 and buying whatever drug can make you want to vacuum your front lawn at 9 o'clock in the morning. A tow truck driver was one of the more frequent regulars. That truck was loud as hell, but it least it reminded me to make my car payment on time. Overall, the neighbors were mostly harmless, and I'd say hello to them when I found them picking through rocks in the alleyway, selecting ones they were positive contained gold ore. But, that night, the truck did what Ollie couldn't. As the engine growled and wheels spun for traction on the frozen street, the owls had enough. The truck pulled away and left our neighborhood quiet again, and the owls were quiet too.

I went inside, chuckling in sarcastic disappointment because I couldn't add another owl sighting to that vital rugged credibility roster, but glad nonetheless that I'd found my way back to a place where I could hear them. Ollie was waiting for me, stretched out on the floor and rolled onto his back, asking for another belly rub. I bent down and appeased him, watching as his head tilted and his gums slipped back to expose his huge bone-white canines. When he'd had enough attention, he curled up in his favorite chair and drifted into deep snores. I sat with him for a while, thinking about the places I've called home and how others think I'm supposed to carry them with me.

I know owls as most others do—sometimes cute, oddly amusing, or majestic in their rarity. I do not know Death, or Montana by its every mile marker. But, I've seen both, talons and all. It was another facet of my home where, no, I never fought a grizzly bear, but where I did have a family, for a while, and the space to explore both the brilliant and the bitter shades of the place I lived in.

Out of the Morgue, Into the Living Room

I.

By the time I was born, my family had acclimated to the occasional death threat. Threats weren't part of my father's real estate deals. Instead, they were just a side effect of my mom's work prosecuting homicide and child abuse cases for the state of Iowa.

One afternoon, my mother received a call in her office. She recognized the voice from recorded depositions used in a trial she won the week before. The call was from a defendant who battered his wife into the Intensive Care Unit and fled once he was convicted and released on bond. His sentencing was supposed to be that morning. He told my mother not to hang up. He said he had a gun.

"This is your fault," he hissed, "but I *promise* you I will not go to prison."

Once the defendant hung up, she informed the detectives in her Homicide Response Unit, a standard procedure for death threats, which rarely resurfaced.

After work, she walked through the parking garage, searching for her car. When she found it, she also found the defendant waiting for her. He started his Cadillac as she approached. He flashed his high beams and revved the engine. She stopped. He slammed the gas, missing her but leaving the acrid stink of burnt rubber.

My mom sped home and called the police, who promised extra patrols in our neighborhood overnight. Then, she rushed Katie, my six-year-old sister, and me out the front door. As we left, my father took one of the skeletal rocking chairs from the living room and placed it in the entryway. He sat down, my grandfather's .357 Magnum in one hand. My mother drove my sister and me to my grandfather's house, but my father stayed

in his chair, his bird dog, Bullet, curled by his side. He was still there when we returned the next morning. He hadn't slept.

I wish I could remember the way he hugged us after we walked back into our house, or his relief later that morning when a detective called to tell them the defendant had been arrested with a loaded 12 gauge in the trunk of his Cadillac. But, while my mom still tells this story sometimes over a glass of wine, I was only two years old then. That summer, for reasons I have never heard, my father left. He took his rocking chair, his .357, and Bullet with him. I never knew my parents together, and the knowledge that all of us lived as a family for a time hangs like a specter with the stories I've heard of death threats and late, worry-steeped nights. It's like looking at one of the few photos from when I was an infant. I don't recognize the rug or the wood flooring, the fireplace in the background. For me, our house on Walnut Creek Drive only exists in stories, and the family that lived there is a myth made real only in retrospect.

Instead, I remember the condo my mom, my sister and I moved to after her divorce from my father. My sister and I spent the weekdays with our mom and the weekends with our dad, who had moved into my grandfather's house on the other side of Des Moines. On weeknights, my mom would bribe my sister and me into acting as her audience, setting a platter of cookies between us while we perched on the linoleum kitchen countertop and she paced back and forth over the blue tiled floor, practicing her opening and closing arguments for her next trial. On those school nights when I couldn't sleep, I'd wander downstairs to the living room and my mother hunched from the edge of the couch, binders littered around her spilling trails of deposition transcripts or other trial documents in piles across the scuffed, rust colored ottoman and onto the floor.

Sometimes, she'd give me a sip of her Diet Pepsi, turn the television on and the volume down, then cover me in my baby blanket so I could drift back to sleep while she continued to work. In my first memories of her, my mom is alone, working into the night and waking at dawn to prod my sister and I towards our breakfast, then the classroom. Even from the start, her career was a part of how she loved us.

Like the mythology of our first home and the nuclear family I never knew, I didn't understand much about my mom, her passion for practicing law, or the path that led her there. Once, I came home from elementary school and plopped down in front of the television to see my mom on the screen, standing behind an oak desk as she summarized her closing arguments before a jury. I ran to the phone and dialed her office number.

"Mom! You're on T.V.!"

"Which one is it?" she asked, distracted. She was still reading whatever document she had been when I called.

"It's on T.L.C.," I said.

She thought for a moment, then couldn't narrow it down.

"What am I wearing?" she asked.

I told her she was wearing the dress with red and gold squares.

"Oh yeah," she said. "That's an old one. I'm surprised they're rerunning it."

I spent the first ten years of my life gathering these snippets of perspective on what my mom did for work, otherwise naive to the greater trajectory of her life. It wasn't until middle school that I learned how she became a prosecutor, about the life she had before me. I asked for her help with a book report for my English class. She walked to the

bookshelf beside her desk, tracing a finger over the alphabetized spines of reference texts and law manuals until she found a battered paperback and plucked it from the row. She handed it to me, explaining that it was about a case she tried.

The book is called *Mockingbird*, by Greg Olsen, and it details my mom's case against a defendant suffering from Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, a psychological disorder that causes a parent or caregiver to inflict harm on their dependent to mimic the symptoms of an illness, earning the caregiver sympathy from others. In this case, it resulted in the death of two infants and severe physical and psychological trauma to several other children. Those who survived were spared only because they endured long enough to learn to talk and could therefore testify to any wrongdoing. When my mom won the case, it was the second successful prosecution of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy in the United States. By the time I read it, my mom had already explained the highlights of the case and the disorder, as well as how difficult it was to prove in a court of law. The part of the book that most interested me was the short biography that Olsen compiled about my mom, as it was the part I had never heard.

As Olson tells it, my mom graduated from high school a year early, then moved to Chicago with her sisters to pursue the love of ballet instilled in them by their mother and their aunt, who ran a dance studio close to our first house on Walnut Creek Drive. After a bad fall and a torn Achilles tendon, my mom knew her dance career was lost. She moved back home to spend a depressed year on the couch until, at the nudging of her father, she went to visit her older sister who was enrolled in a dance program at the University of Utah. The afternoon she arrived, my mom decided it was time for her to go to college.

She snuck into the University of Utah mid-year, completed her probationary semester, and worked as a bartender until she graduated with a degree in Women's Studies.

After graduation, my mom took a year off before she decided to move home and attend law school. During her first year, her mother committed suicide. Then, in the year following, my mother watched from her boyfriend's bedside as an aggressive case of pneumonia ended his life. In the wake of both deaths, she reconnected with my father, a fellow graduate of Valley High School. They began dating and, nine months later, they were engaged. She graduated from law school and lunged towards her career, unwilling to slow down, even when my sister and I came along a few years later.

I returned to my Mom with the book and flipped to a dog-eared page in the center, one in the chunk of gloss pages that always tell a kid where to mine for photographs. I pointed to a black and white picture of my mom and sister, pointe shoes aloft in perfect form as they warmed up backstage of an annual Nutcracker performance produced by my great aunt. The date in the photo's caption told me I was just over a year old when it was taken. I asked my mom why there weren't any photos of me, and why the text only mentioned my sister when it talked about our family.

"For the same reason those kids in the book died," she said. "Only, to protect you. When Greg asked us if he should mention you, your father and I agreed on a rule to keep you off of anyone's radar until you learned to talk. We were afraid that some of the people I've put in jail might read it and see you as bait for revenge. If they got hold of you, you'd never be able to tell anyone what they looked like or what they did."

I shivered, handed her the book, and she chuckled. She placed it back on the shelf.

I did not exist until I learned to talk, to remember. The family unit I was born into was a page of exposition in someone else's book. I met my next family just as those tendrils of memory took root, when my mom began dating Tom, the forensic pathologist who became her second husband.

I was four, too young to keep from fidgeting in the sling meant to heal the collarbone I broke when someone pushed me off the slide at preschool. I asked my mom what a collar bone was, picturing the starched collars on my father's rack of dress shirts. My mom discussed it with Tom, who responded with a show-and-tell presentation.

When he walked into the living room of our cramped, post-divorce condo later that week, Tom had a white cardboard box under his arm. A grin peeking from the corners of his silver moustache, he set the box on the carpet, removed the lid, and handed me a human skull. It was lighter than I thought it should be, and some teeth from the top jaw were missing. Tom pulled more bones from the box and set them on the floor.

As we placed each bone in its anatomical place, Tom and I named the skeleton Sorry Charlie. Once we had counted to 206, Tom pointed to the collarbone.

"That's the one you broke," he said.

I felt the spark of knowing as I massaged my own broken collarbone. Then, we counted Charlie's bones back into the box as my mom watched, perched on the ottoman and smiling between sips of her soda.

I met Tom's four sons at a barbeque held on their aunt's farm outside of Des Moines. Jack was nine years older than me, senior enough to sneak a lighter around in his pocket for the rare stash of fireworks. He lit strings of fire crackers under his shoes and

giggled as the muffled pops tickled the arch of his foot and peppered the soles of his Adidas with black spots. I tried to play soccer with Jack and the rest of the boys—Nick, Mark, and Scott. But, they were older, faster, and impatient. When we gave up and ventured down to the creek to catch crayfish, my sister stayed behind. For me, at least, having my formative memories congeal around my stepbrothers made it easier to accept an expanded idea of family. Jack and I were closest, finding that bond quicker than the rest.

Jack excelled in what I believe are the qualities of a good sibling. For example, he was a terrible babysitter who prioritized fun over responsibility. Once, when our parents went out to dinner and tasked Jack with enforcing my bedtime, he decided it was a better idea to let me indulge in the two-liter bottle of Coca-Cola and the tray of brownies he had squirreled away in a downstairs cupboard. When my parents came home, I was sprinting circles around a column in the center of our basement, my arms stretched like wings as I buzzed my best imitation of a turboprop. I continued on my flight path until I crash landed sometime after 2 A.M. This resulted in a house-wide embargo of caffeinated soda, and Katie, four years older than me, was granted supreme babysitting oversight.

It is almost as difficult to remember a time before my brothers as it is to remember a time before my sister. I did not adapt so much as I just grew, basing the foundation of my status quo on the properties of my surroundings. I was too young to know the difference between the before and after.

It was this same phenomenon that blinded us to the oddity of our parents bringing their work back to the house when they returned from the office each day. We made a home from a charnel house because, like the death threats we had come to expect, we

were raised among the artifacts of death and trauma. I learned how to pronounce the phrase “subdural hematoma” before I could spell the word cranium, and I knew that human fatty tissue has the yellowed hue of sweet corn before I had enough adult teeth to eat a whole ear off the cob. The macabre bonded us together in the stories we told and the laughs we shared, and none of us were spared from it.

A few years after my red-eye flight around the basement, the downstairs snack fridge had been repurposed by Tom as part of his home office, where he kept a microscope to examine tissue samples. One afternoon, my sister arrived home from school and, either through force of habit or forgetfulness, went to the downstairs fridge for a snack. She found a plastic Wilcoxson's ice cream tub and pried back the lid. When she saw the brain, she dropped the tub and screamed her way to the house next door. Tom was able to salvage tissue samples from the specimen, but weeks passed before we could stop wrinkling our noses at the caustic blanket of formaldehyde stench that accompanied every trip to the basement.

As kids, we had our suburban rites of passage, like the day Jack unscrewed the training wheels from my bike and I made my first lap around the driveway. But, there were other milestones peculiar to our family, such as a child's first autopsy.

On Jack's baptismal morgue visit, the body slated for examination had been found after bloating for a few days in the humid Iowa summer. Before the autopsy, as Jack and Tom walked through the back door of the hospital and down the hallway leading to the morgue, Jack unwrapped a Jolly Rancher and popped it into his mouth.

“I don't think you want to do that,” Tom said.

Jack shrugged. He thought it might help with the smell.

A few minutes after the autopsy started, Tom nicked the bowels with his scalpel. Jack scurried from the morgue, dry heaved back down the hallway, then projectile vomited over the stairs of the hospital's loading dock. When Tom came to check on him, Jack was still hunched over the concrete.

“You could taste it, couldn't you?” Tom asked.

Jack nodded.

When my parents divorced, I was still loyal to my father, unwilling to betray the instinct of my biological relationship by embracing Tom as a father figure. But, Tom and I had more immediate disagreements.

One night, when I was 6, Tom was frustrated when I rejected his offer to help me clip my toenails. I wanted my mom to help, but she was working in the northern Iowa town of Okoboji. Exasperated, Tom pried the clippers from my hand and went to work anyway. He shoved the blades of the clippers until they met the flesh of each toe, and I felt a pinch with every click. I started to cry and told him that he was cutting them too short.

“That's impossible,” he snapped. “You don't have nerve endings there.”

Looking back, I realize how easy that was for him to say given that his patients were dead and couldn't protest a close trim, let alone a bone saw through the ribcage. But, I wonder if he noticed when one of my toes started to bleed, or if he just ignored it.

Tom and I had our collisions, but there were also rare moments of understanding, even bonding. Around the same time he tried to clip my toenails, Tom and the boys spent an entire evening in the basement, struggling to piece together a model train set that Santa

would bestow upon me a few weeks later. And, later that year, after my bedtime tore me away from that miracle of a train set, Tom knocked on my bedroom door. He asked if I had any model glue. Twisting a fist in my eye socket, I scrounged through the drawers next to my bed until I found the orange and white tube of Testors cement, rolled at the base from the progress my grandfather and I had made on my plastic model of the U.S.S. Iowa the weekend before. Tom took the glue, and since I was a recent expert at assembling 1/700 scale gun turrets, I followed. On Tom's desk, a skull sat on a piece of parchment paper. This one had only a jagged line above where the eyebrows would've been. The other fragments were scattered on the paper.

“We found all of these pieces in the forest,” Tom said. “Now, we have to put them back together.”

I helped assemble the puzzle pieces as he glued them into place, but soon fell asleep until he nudged me towards bed.

In the morning, Tom showed me the completed skull. I couldn't touch it, but he pointed to the entrance and the exit of the .30-06 round. The entry wound, just above the right eyebrow, was the same size as my pinky finger. The exit was about the size of a quarter, because, Tom explained, the bullet had split like a banana peel and vaporized that bit of bone before exploding most of the cranium. He had a spare bullet to show me how big it was before.

“After it's put back together,” he said, “we can calculate what direction and angle the bullet came from, maybe even who fired it.”

This was my first lesson in forensic ballistics, as well as Tom's authoritarian scientific posture. There was only one possible trajectory, one possible velocity, and one

possible shooter. His explanations of a person's final moments were not up for review, especially by a seven-year-old. But, I was too much of a child to take his word as anything but fact and, now, try not to fault myself for it. It was what we knew.

After helping Tom solve the puzzle of the shattered skull, I took more of an interest in my parents' work. I wasn't sure why, but they were happy to oblige.

"It's good for you to know this stuff," my mom would say as she pulled the prehistoric Kodak slide projector from the closet.

Whether or not she actually believed that, the promise of viewing evidence slides before bed was an effective way to spur me towards folding my laundry or picking up my room. After setting up the projector, my mom would pick a carousel of slides from the leaning stacks that lined the closet walls. Most of the time, she and Tom would leave me to flip through the images on my own. The pictures were staccato, meaningless without context. A snub nose .44 painted to look like an American flag, spent shell casings placed next to it in a neat line on the concrete floor. A bucket of brown sludge under a wooden chair with a crude hole cut into the seat. Next to the chair, a shackle and a slither of chain padlocked to a prison-style cot.

Some of the slides focused on people, or at least parts of them. There were blossoming purple contusions along backs and sides. A naked body, its head tilted forward, hanging from a ceiling joist of a cluttered home. A miniature arm, glowing fire red under the neat white diamonds of a mesh graft stapled into the muscle to keep anymore skin from sloughing off.

I remember that arm because it belonged to a 7-month-old child.

My mother told me the story of that case during one of the nights she sat with me as a guide while I flipped through slides. The infant had been left in the care of their mother's boyfriend, who grew frustrated with the crying infant. As punishment for the annoyance, the boyfriend threw a pot of boiling water over the child's head. When questioned by the police, the boyfriend told them that the infant had accidentally turned on the hot water tap while in the bath.

"Bullshit," my mother said.

My mother won her case with forensic burn analysis presented by an expert witness. The severity of the burns lessened the further they got from the child's head, indicating that the water had cooled by that point. When considered with the 3rd degree burns covering 95 percent of the child's head and arms, the suggested trajectory of the scalding water eliminated the bathtub faucet as a source due to height and angle restrictions. That, and the 7-month-old hadn't developed the motor skills necessary to turn on the faucet. My mom recounted the trial and her struggles to lead the jury to an eventual conviction.

The concept of a jury was still foreign, and the need to convince one of something had never crossed my mind. I didn't understand that there could be multiple perspectives to the trajectory of a bullet or stream of water. These were just bedtime stories alongside *Charlotte's Web*. There was no reason not to believe that guilt was a certainty and my parents were doing a good thing by putting bad people in jail. There was no ambiguity. No trial. The slides, the body parts, and the stories were still detached from my reality and factualized by parental authority.

That's why I didn't say much when, one summer, my mom and Tom gathered our family in the kitchen of our Iowa house. They broke the news that we were moving to Montana because Tom had taken a new job. My sister sobbed, and some my brothers peeled away, half of them deciding to go live with their mother. Jack decided to move with us, at least. Our parents framed the relocation as an opportunity, a journey into the great west as a quest for prosperity. We would get to see cowboys and rattlesnakes, or explore the sandstone cliffs behind our new house.

Tom didn't tell us about the whispers of malpractice charges floating around the office of the Iowa Medical Examiner, or explain the difference between prosperity and a strongly suggested resignation.

We moved to Montana because we were locked into the trajectory of the family we had scraped together. We didn't have all of the evidence to convince us otherwise.

II.

I don't see my mom much anymore. Her mail is delivered to a home about two hundred miles from mine, a short jaunt in the expanded sense of travel time engrained in Montanans. But, her consulting business keeps her fighting the briquette pillows of international hotels most nights in a year. This past September, still recovering from a major hip replacement, she only spent a week in her own home, a side-effect of the new career she anticipated as "an opportunity to settle down a bit."

Still, we find time to talk in rapid fire bursts, while she's stuck in a purgatorious airport layover or over a hurried glass of wine in the half hour between a fundraiser and the corresponding dinner bringing her to my side of the mountains for a night. Mostly, we talk about her travel, a case that my sister is trying as a prosecutor for the D.A. in Denver,

or she asks for an update on the cancer diagnoses sprouting like a virile patch of dandelions on my dad's side of the family in recent years. There is a boundary in the directions we speak, an unspoken refusal for retrospection. We don't talk about the time before we both left Montana for nearly a decade, we just talk about how nice it is to be back home.

Recently, I stepped over that boundary by asking my mom to clarify my memories of the autopsy and crime scene photos that I was allowed to flip through as a child. I stuck as close as I could to the raw content of the slides, working from a bulleted list of the images I remembered most clearly. For each slide I recalled, my mom would return the name of the victim and the year of the trial in an instant. She remembered every one without a single lapse. She hasn't tried a case in 15 years but has maintained that internal archive seared into her by the personal stake she took in every court case.

I asked about a slide of a sludge filled bucket under a chair turned toilet, and the corresponding photos of a prison style cot, a stained mattress, and a pair of handcuffs. I thought a novelty Coke machine had been shoved into one corner of the concrete basement. After the immediate recitation of name and year, she corrected me.

“It was a neon Coke sign, one of the only lights down there.”

The victim's father shackled the seven-year-old to the cot in the basement for two months, sustaining the kid's consciousness with sporadic rations of cat food. He was handcuffed to an overhead pipe for seven days so he couldn't lash out while his father burned him with scalding water and sliced his sides with a hunting knife. Then, his sister, allowed to live upstairs, made a concerning remark to a neighbor, who called the police.

As the head of Polk County’s Child Trauma Task Force, a special team of investigators and prosecutors on call to respond to instances of suspected child abuse, my mom accompanied the responding officers to the home. The parents moved the boy upstairs and rushed to cover his wounds, but they couldn’t hide the two months of neglect or seven days of extreme physical torture. The boy was sent to the hospital, and the officers forced the father to unlock the basement in their search of the house. As my mother descended the stairs and saw the artifacts of what the parents had done, she made the officers and investigators stand by until a photographer could capture the entirety of the undisturbed crime scene from multiple angles. Telling me about the case, she called this “setting the scene.”

“Look,” she explained, “if we walked into a crime scene in a bedroom, the first thing the cops would want to do is luminol the bed and check for fluids, then send the sheets to forensics for confirmation, but that evidence is more for us than for any jury. For jury, they can only see a crime happening if they can envision where it happened.”

“So your job was to build that narrative in the mind of the jury?” I asked.

“From the get-go. Cops don’t like to be told how to do their job, but most of them aren’t thinking about the trial when they walk into a room and start tearing things apart to look at the dust in the cracks. The best way to sway any jury is to give them a complete vision of the undisturbed scene—the broken lamp, the crumpled bed sheets, the dent in the drywall, the chaos as one idea.”

For the little boy who was locked in the basement, setting the scene still didn’t matter without physical evidence to corroborate his testimony. In the weeks before the trial, my mom asked investigators to examine every pipe running through the basement

ceiling of the victim's home. They returned with photographs of a section of dull, oxidized pipe scarred with shining scratches from the chain connecting the handcuffs. She still insists that those scratches wouldn't have made the case had it not been for the photos of the entire crime scene she used to begin her opening statement during trial.

“That bastard died in prison a few years ago,” she said.

The mother, complicit in the abuse of both children, is still in prison. My mom admitted that she regrets this on occasion, as the incarcerated mother had a low I.Q. that, in my mom's opinion, called her understanding of the situation into question. This regret never lasts long, however, after my mom rehashes the horrors of the case in detail.

“It was the first successfully tried charge of parental kidnapping in the United States,” she added, a note of pride rising in her voice.

My family moved to Montana a few weeks before my seventh birthday, and I was old enough to see the stress the move was causing the family, manifesting in a snap over a roll of packing tape or a burst of tears once a room was emptied. The tipping point came one night, when I found Tom in the living room, huffing as he hung up the phone on his ex-wife. I don't know if they were negotiating custody of the boys, or if it was just one of the several other topics that could send Tom into a rage when he talked with her. When I walked into the room, he narrowed his eyes.

“That fucking bitch,” he hissed. “Some people just don't get it.”

Tom stood and mumbled about work to be done as he stomped towards the staircase leading to his office. Before he left, he told me that I did not hear what he just said. He admitted those were bad words, but that sometimes unreasonable people drive

the most reasonable to do mean things. This bounced off my kindergarten understanding of relationships like a rubber ball. I had only met Terry, Tom's ex-wife, a handful of times and was oblivious to anything she could've done to make him so angry. But, something must've happened to make him swear. I decided our family needed the only solution I could think of, a vacation.

I brought the phone handset to Jack and asked him to dial the number for the airport. After a puzzled moment, he took the phone and pressed the buttons in a convincing series of beeps, then handed it back to me as I retreated to the living room to preserve the surprise. The line connected immediately, and I declared with the confidence of a superior amateur aviation enthusiast that I would like to reserve a 747 for a quick, but essential, family furlough. I was relieved when the person I was speaking with assured me this would be no problem if I would just tell them where we wanted to travel. I thought, then settled on Florida because it was the only place I'd ever travelled outside of the Midwest.

“And, how would you like to pay for this?” they asked.

This was the hitch in my plan, the one factor I had overlooked. Just a few weeks before, my idea for a neighborhood lawn care business sputtered to a halt when I discovered what my parents called ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ didn't grant me the physical strength to start a lawnmower on my own. I didn't think the coin jar in my bedroom would cover it, so I found Jack again, sitting on a pile of boxes in his old bedroom.

“Can I borrow a credit card?” I asked.

He tried so hard to hold himself together, but melted into a flood of laughs, dropping the other phone handset on the floor. When he caught his breath, Jack parroted

the same bright tone of the person I believed was working at the airport, and I understood that I had been talking with my brother.

At first, I felt injured by the betrayal. But, in the days before the move, I met my goal of cheering everyone up. Sitting on the living room floor around a stack of pizza boxes or herd of takeout containers, they would recite the parts of the conversation that Jack had told them before bursting into giggles, even going so far as to imitate the ‘R’ sounds I hadn’t quite learned how to pronounce by then.

Then, we left. Mark and Scott, the oldest of Tom’s sons, stayed in Iowa. They found an apartment together in Iowa City so Mark could finish his last year of college and Scott could start his first. Nick, a year older than my sister, joined Jack in the decision to come to Billings. My sister and I weren’t granted the same choice. We piled into the family S.U.V., elbows colliding as I squirmed in the middle seat. Our five cats mewed in their crates, stacked like firewood in the back of the tired Mitsubishi. Spike’s cries could be heard above all the others, and Jack took a moment to remind everyone of the hours he had spent in the basement, locked in a staring contest with our cat as he tried to teach it how to say ‘hello.’ To his credit, Spike’s meow did approximate the greeting, and Jack pronounced his efforts a success, deeming himself the ‘Cat Whisperer’ as we pulled onto the interstate.

We left the rich green cornfields and black soil of Iowa for the brittle grass and blowing dust of the mountain west. The drive was an eternity, but I distracted myself by practicing my pronunciation, sounding out and reciting every Wall Drug billboard we passed along Interstate 90 while NPR droned through the car stereo.

Our new house had a backyard of manicured lawn surrounded by a rock wall to quarantine the twisting brambles of juniper and sage reaching from the wild hillside beyond. Beyond the wall, a boulder field spotted the khaki slope with sandstone as it climbed to meet the Rimrocks, a towering wall of cliffs slashed across the northern edge of Billings. We arrived just before the 4th of July, when the tufts of native grass molt from flexible green to the fragile tan of the earth and become, as Jack would demonstrate during our holiday BBQ, highly combustible.

Our parents viewed the 4th of July as an opportunity to host the neighbors they had met over their several trips to purchase the home, while Jack viewed it as an opportunity to take advantage of the liberal local regulations governing firework sales. Our next-door neighbor, Daryl, who would soon be appointed the chief of police, strolled over with a six pack to join the others gathered in our backyard. When twilight crawled up the face of the Rimrocks, Jack began the fireworks show for the spectators lounging on blankets spread over the lawn. Daryl chuckled as Jack scrambled away from slithering fuses, reminding him on occasion to direct anything airborne over the house and towards the hydrated front lawn.

Daryl's warnings did nothing for the hillside when Jack tripped, knocking over the launch tube for the mortar round that then sent a fireball into the dry grass. Drinks hit the ground as the adults wrenched up their blankets and tried to beat the growing blaze. Frantic stomps chased cartwheeling embers. Someone grabbed the garden hose, but it was too short. Fire trucks wailed up the driveway and firefighters ran hoses to flood the blaze into a steaming streak of black char along the hillside.

When the calamity subsided, my mom retreated to the kitchen to cork another bottle of chardonnay. Tom stood in the driveway, explaining to a group of very unenthusiastic firefighters that, in Iowa, it was a *good* thing to burn the grass. Hell, maybe it'd help the soil out for next year. Daryl stood behind him, howling with laughter as he cracked another beer.

The summer passed, I started the first grade, and we withstood our first central Montana winter. In the spring, the grass on the hillside grew back, the scorched earth swallowed by the seasons. The only lasting casualty was a small tree that still clung to the ground despite turning gnarled, blackened, and bare. The tree leaned over a coulee from a crevice in a pile of sandstone boulders. These rocks were stacked like derailed train cars in what Jack and I discovered to be a comfortable fort.

For Jack, the fort in the hillside was a place to sneak a beer or a spliff with his friends as he careened into his senior year of high school. For me, the fort was populated with the outlaws I had dreamed up as we moved West, a battleground where harrowing standoffs and brutal gunfights sparked to life. The summer before he left for college, Jack took a hammer and chisel up to the fort and, in the split face of a boulder that dwarfed us, carved the letter J in neat script. I asked him what it meant.

“It’s for both of us,” he said. “This can be our spot.”

When Jack left to start his freshman year in Bozeman, I turned 9 and inherited stewardship of the fort, a responsibility that still largely dictated by imagination. On after school afternoons, I scurried upwards, disappearing into the boulders. I made up stories about the outlaws I traveled with, broke open soft chunks of sandstone in search of the

dinosaur fossils I was sure they contained, or I just sat, watching grasshoppers rattle from rock to grass and back again.

I could see our garden from the fort, and would sometimes watch my mom as she pruned the basil or furrowed her brow in concern for the Iowa tomatoes she couldn't replicate in such sandy soil. She refused to enter the garden without knee high muck boots, a precaution against the rattlesnakes that terrorized her. The few times a summer when her fears were realized and she happened upon a rattler lounging under the rhubarb or sunbathing on the rocks, she would sprint to Daryl's house. The first time, as she pounded on the door, she shouted for him to bring his handgun. Daryl emerged from the garage with a garden spade in place of his service pistol. I climbed down from the fort as they approached. Tom emerged from the house as my mom pointed Daryl towards the snake. I followed him as he approached, and marveled at the speed he brought the spade down and through the snake. The snake was young, too young to grow a rattle, so its body whispered over the soil in frantic convulsions.

After, when my mom confirmed the snake adequately decapitated, I was allowed closer. A snake's neurons keep firing after its head is severed, and it can still deliver a bite in those minutes it refuses to die. I poked the snake's nose with the end of the spade, and it attacked the metal and spit dark spots of venom in the shovel's dusting of pale dirt. When the snake finally ceased, Tom used the spade to coax the head into a piece of Tupperware, then filled it with rubbing alcohol to suspend decay. But, in a few months, the eyes glazed milky and the flesh stained the clear liquid to murk. When a fresh specimen would wander into the garden, it would meet our spade, then writhe and snap until it didn't. Tom would give me the snake heads to place on the bookshelves in my

room, and, if the snake was old enough to have a rattle, we would separate that too, leaving it on a boulder so the dry heat could suck the moisture from any remaining connective tissue. After a few days, if a curious bird didn't claim the rattle, I would. I'd give my souvenir a test shake to make sure it still sounded, then retreat back to the fort for what was left of the evening.

That fort was a perch, a watchtower, and then a hiding spot. I sought cover there when I caught Nick, Tom's youngest, drinking beer in the basement at 16 and didn't know what else to do but run upstairs and tell my parents, who were in the midway through an appetizer and glass of wine with the pastor from our church. Nick was furious, and blamed me for our parents anger and embarrassment. Nick and I didn't talk much for the next few months, and I would hide in the Rims when I heard his Jeep climbing the driveway after school let out. Then, one morning around 3 A.M., Daryl delivered Nick to our front door, sopping wet and so drunk he couldn't explain what happened. Daryl told my parents how Nick and his friend drank enough booze to kill most smaller mammals, then decided to drive to the south end of town for a midnight bridge jump into the Yellowstone River. Nick's friend couldn't fight the current, the ambulance arrived, and the EMT's pulled him from the water, where he was floating, facedown and unconscious, in the gentle backflow of an eddy. After Daryl left, there wasn't a big blow up, no screaming or tantrums. Instead, Nick spent the next few weeks packing his room, then he returned to Sioux City to finish high school while living with his mother.

Our house was not lawless, nor were we banished for transgressing the expectations placed upon us. Nick's departure was a special circumstance, an outlier that was rarely mentioned after he left. For the most part, my mom retained the jurisdiction to

dole out sentences for misbehavior. My mom is rarely overbearing and often understanding, but she is far from naive. It was uncommon for her to resort to house arrest or other standard reform tactics that my friends faced from their parents, a tendency illustrated when, a few years after Nick left, a house party down the street from ours earned my sister a citation for being a minor in possession of alcohol.

Katie and her friends almost avoided the ticket, until an officer taking down the information of other teenagers became convinced that my sister was using her position on the stairwell, where he had told her to sit and wait, to help others sneak out of the back door. My sister, with a resistance my mom now admits makes her a bit proud, refused the officer's claim in a back and forth that ended with the citation and a courtroom date with her other friends and assumed accomplices.

On the day of their trial, my mom gathered my sister and all of her friends while they waited to be called into court. Some of the friends cried out of fear that they might be kicked off the cheerleading team or have their records tarnished on college applications. My mom reassured them that she would do her best to make sure that did not happen, then pulled my sister to the back of the line.

They entered the courtroom as a group to stand before Judge Waters, a notoriously tough judge who, it was well known, despised any insinuated plea of ignorance. But, for each of my sister's friends, my mom argued for leniency, highlighting each individual's investment in extracurricular activities or examples of community service, however tenuous or short lived. One by one, each sentence was reduced or deferred away by Judge Waters. My sister stood next to my mom with a newfound confidence as Judge Waters leaned over her bench.

“Mel, this is your daughter and you know the penalties for this one, so I’m going to defer to your judgement.”

“Double it. Double everything.”

The color drained from my sister’s face as the judge hesitated, then sentenced her to several thousand dollars in fines and 350 hours of community service. My mom thanked the judge, grabbed my catatonic sister by the elbow. and dragged her from the courtroom. Later, once my sister regained the ability to speak, she screamed from the second-floor balcony of our home, demanding my mother explain why everyone else had gotten off easy.

“I already talked to their parents,” my mom stated. “I had to so I could speak for them. They’ve all been informed of the potential ramifications and they’ve promised they’re going to enforce them in the ways they see fit. Being on the cheerleading team doesn’t give you a pass when you backtalk a cop.”

That summer, my sister spent every spare moment scooping ice cream at Baskin Robbins to pay off her fines, combing the sides of the highway for litter, or filing paperwork for the county clerk. At home, my sister’s complaints were met with indifference, or a reprisal of the offense.

While my mom didn’t neglect our successes or spare us from broken rules, the practical requirements of her job as a prosecutor meant that she often wasn’t home to catch them. After Jack left for college and Nick returned to Iowa, it was the first time my sister and I shared a house with Tom. As one of few forensic pathologists in Montana, Tom also spent his share of weekends driving his pickup truck over the Bozeman pass to

a morgue on the other side of the state. But, those weekends were just an opportunity to spend time with my mom over a bowl of mac n' cheese. Those other weekends, where my mom was called away and Tom was left in charge, drag and catch like a fish hook in my memories.

One night, when I was 10 years old and my mom was gone, my sister and I sat at the kitchen table with Tom, eating soup that my mom left simmering on the stove. At least, I was trying to eat. I had a stomach bug, and every bite of the chowder hurtled back up with a retch. Sighing, Tom placed a steel mixing bowl next to my bowl of partially recycled soup to catch the vomit. I asked to be excused, but Tom insisted that I couldn't leave the table until one of the bowls was empty. Katie asked him to stop, to let me go to bed, until Tom slammed his fist on the table, making the glasses shutter and the silverware rattle.

"He's making it up," he said, trying to calm himself. He told my sister that she could leave if she wanted, but I needed to be taught a lesson in respect.

When my mom was gone, I would hide in the fort, or spend the evening two blocks away at a friend's house, where I was always invited to stay for dinner and the mixing bowls were used for their intended purpose. I was afraid of Tom because, although I couldn't articulate it then, the contrast between his demeanor in public and his demeanor at home had no logical tie.

On the odd weekends both my mom and Tom were at home, they would sometimes host events for one regional politician or another. It was a perfect audience, a network of doctors and lawyers who jumped at the chance to lighten any moral burden by signing a check to a democratic candidate or a liberal cause. My mom would laugh and

chat over the kitchen island while she prepared appetizers or poured wine. Tom would patrol the room, dressed in a buttoned-up work shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots that he sold as appropriate with a comment about his rural Iowa upbringing to anyone listening. Tom was like a watering hole at these events, gathering the herd of fellow doctors for small talk and medical stories that seemed refreshingly sincere. One of his favorite party stories was of an autopsy he performed in rural Montana. The body was of a man who decided to sober up and attend his first AA meeting, but had a disastrous run in with a territorial moose as he was walking back to his home. Every time Tom told this story, a member of his audience slapped their knee or clapped him on the back. Someone would reiterate some version of, *I bet the last thing that poor sucker thought about was a dirty martini.*

With Tom, there was no baseline, no normal, but there was a scene. To separate Tom from the rest of my family or my memories from childhood robs his actions of the context that make them so bizarre. The times when I hid from him are inseparable from the Christmas dinners where the boys flew home and I learned to shovel mashed potatoes into my mouth at near supersonic speed to catch a second helping before they were gone. On those nights, we would sit around the table for hours, letting the gravy congeal while we doubled over with giggles, retelling old stories about Jack teaching a cat to say hello or Nick throwing all of his Star Wars toys out a window because he thought they could fly.

I was 10 years old when I saw a corpse for the first time. That evening, I rode with my mom to the other side of Billings, thawing the fall chill from my stiff fingers by holding them over the dashboard air vent. That morning, Tom left his pickup truck with

the mechanic, so we needed to collect him from the hospital before going to dinner with friends. My mom called him on the way, wondering if she could bring me into the morgue as he finished up.

“Is it a gross one?” she asked. “Okay, good. I’ll bring him with me.”

We parked, then walked towards the hospital's loading dock, our heads bent forward in the frigid wind. On the other occasions where someone had to drop by the morgue on an odd errand, I would be left in the running car, relishing free reign over the radio or submerged in a new library book. That afternoon, I abandoned my usual post, trying hard to keep up with my mom as we made our way across the lot among the skittering leaves.

We entered into a hallway of easy-to-scrub white tile under harsh fluorescent light. This was different from the carpeted pediatric center that I knew, with its massive fish tank full of purple and pink coral foxholes for a school of tropical fish that seemed to bear their shellshock well as kids ignored the posted sign not to tap on the glass. I knew a sterile but comfortable office, bustling with soft smiling pediatricians and nurses who tried their best to comfort my peers and me as we wailed against that year’s flu shot or gagged during the throat swab for another strep test. I had never seen the forgotten side of that place, abandoned for the weekend and left to an eerie stillness. We passed shrink-wrapped pallets of supplies lined against one wall, and a row of wheelchairs, half-folded, their backs labelled ‘Property of St. Vincent Hospital’ in stenciled white spray paint. *Who would want to steal a wheelchair?* I thought, as we approached the towering steel door to the morgue.

My mom placed her hand on my shoulder, turning me to face her as she knelt and brushed the collar of my buttoned up ‘fancy dinner’ shirt like we were about to walk into Sunday service.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” she asked.

I nodded, uncomfortable with a conversation I felt was overkill after all of the autopsy slides and disembodied organs that orbited my childhood.

“I always just think of a body as a sort of shell,” she explained. “It’s something that used to have a human in it, and now it’s just hollow.”

I nodded, then she stood and entered a code on the keypad to unlock the door. Inside, I noticed the floor of the windowless room, white like the hallway, and the glint of the overhead lights on the stainless-steel platforms of the electronic scales perched on the countertops. The scales reminded me of the deli at our neighborhood grocery store, the same ones used to measure the pile of roast beef or chicken breasts destined for dinner or a bagged lunch. I also recognized the smell, thick like when I helped my mom spread bags of manure over her garden in the summer. It was the way Tom smelled when he came home from work, persistent even if he changed his shirt and washed his hands. The sharp reek of bleach pierced the blanket odor of decay and formaldehyde.

We walked through the lab and into the autopsy theatre, where Tom, in a blue, tissue-paper gown, finished arranging some instruments in their proper drawer under the counter. I saw the body’s toes beyond the lip of the stainless-steel table, and, behind it, the row of steel, human-sized hatches in the wall like a monochrome checkers board. Tom beckoned me forward, and I walked towards him.

The corpse was a middle-aged man. I remember the graying hair, bisected by a red line that curved over the crown of the head, some of it matted from the fluid released when Tom folded back the scalp, traced a line with his bone saw, and popped the skull cap. I was too short to see much of the face, but I saw the horizon of the chest and one branch of the Y shaped incision Tom had made to roll back the flesh of the breast and access the chest cavity. These incisions were evidence, pieces I used to put together the process of the autopsy from all the times I had asked my parents how they were performed while we sat next to the Kodak slide projector in their bedroom.

“He hanged himself,” Tom said.

He pointed to the violet contusions above the Adam’s apple. Then, he showed me the feet and legs, where the blood had pooled into blossoms of deep purple in the clay flesh after the heart had stopped pumping.

“Those, along with some other clues, can help us figure out how long it was before someone found him.”

Tom walked to the counter, then held up a plastic bag full of marble sized steel bearings.

“Found these in his colon,” he said, grinning as he shook the bag. “They’d been up there a while.”

“Really, Tom?” my mom asked, irritated.

I looked at both of them expectantly, curious beyond my second hand knowledge of sex or medicine.

“We found ‘em in his butt,” Tom said. “Everyone has their quirks.”

My mom called an end to the anatomy lesson, and we stood off to one side of the room. Tom whistled to himself while he slid the corpse back into its assigned drawer, peeled off his latex gloves and paper gown, and shut down the morgue for the night. We stopped by his office so he could change into a fresh shirt, then we went to dinner.

My first interaction with the body of a deceased human lodges in my memory as little more than just that—a first. It was a confirmation of the clinical, objective way my parents had to process aspects of their chosen fields. But, there were differences in the way they spoke about death and the reverence they held for the people it ended. For my mom, dealing with death and trauma in an analytical, evidence base manner was essential to her success as well as the possibility for at least some justice on behalf of the victims. But, behind her matter-of-factness, her personal investment and her ability to humanize kept her motivated—as illustrated by her ability to remember the individuals over the crimes committed against them, or how she has always insisted that having children of her own was one of the biggest reasons she became a child abuse prosecutor. While the realities of both her and Tom’s professions expressed themselves in occasional callousness or bluntness surrounding death, Tom seemed to have less empathetic boundaries when it came to the artifacts of trauma.

Not long after my first encounter with a corpse, we were at another dinner, gathered around the table with the family of a doctor from St. Vincent’s that Tom considered a friend. After the meal, in the idle talk that comes over a piece of pie, Tom turned the conversation toward his home field advantage, sharing a few of the cases he had seen recently. He mentioned the autopsy of a morbidly obese woman he nicknamed ‘Big Bertha,’ the name he had also given his largest suitcase. The other doctor at the

table, used to dealing with people who were still breathing, feigned a chuckle. Tom reached for his wallet, thumbing through his receipts until he found the slim polaroid he was looking for.

“Couldn’t fit her in the drawers,” he laughed, trying to pass the photo to our hosts.

I saw the color drain from my mother’s face and heard the thump of heel against leg as she kicked him under the table. The other doctor waved the photo away, insisting he didn’t need to see it. The doctor’s son, a few years older than me, reached for the polaroid. His mother pushed his hand away as my mom hissed at Tom to get rid of the picture. After, the ride back to our house was silent, punctuated by my mom’s brief admonishment.

“You know that was inappropriate.”

Tom shrugged, then reassured her it was just meant to be funny.

I was oblivious to any wrongdoing. An autopsy photo didn’t seem out of place to me, even at the dinner table. Our family had ill-defined borders regarding tableside etiquette and gore, and I still had yet to see the roots of my mother’s passion, her belief in the intrinsic value of life and how they came about. I’d see that a few years later, when I lobbied my mom to relieve me of the catechism classes she insisted I attend at the local Lutheran church.

My mom repeated that I was already enrolled and that attendance wasn’t optional. I was surprised, although I was used to the occasional months where she would find a refreshed sense of devotion and wake my siblings and me on Sunday mornings, chide us into our most presentable clothes, and herd us towards the car. Most Sunday’s we were late, waiting in the church lobby until a break in the service signaled our chance to scurry

into the closest open pew. Still, coordinating the clandestine movement of a family as large as ours could compete with a full church choir shuffling into position, and we always earned a few disapproving stares. During the service, Tom and I played tic-tac-toe on the back of his program, while any of the siblings who dozed off mid-sermon faced a swift wallop with my mom's program, kept rolled up and ready to strike at any flutter of eyelids or sigh deemed too heavy.

We would try our best for a month, maybe two, until the odd sleepover or Sunday brunch won out over another morning at church. Overall, we were fair-weather Lutherans, catching the Easter or Christmas Eve services while allowing Garrison Keillor to be a worthwhile substitute on most Sunday afternoons. From my view, my mom had damned me to extra duty, served in a fruitless string of dull, winter Wednesday nights with other kids in a classroom at King of Glory Lutheran Church.

One evening, after my introduction to Martin Luther and his proclamation, I confronted my mom in the bedroom she shared with Tom. She looked up from the deposition transcript spread over the desk, anxious to resume preparation for the impending trial. She asked why I thought I didn't have to follow through with confirmation. I responded, armed with the bluster of my 12 years, that I had decided I was an atheist. God didn't make any sense to me in the face of reason and logic.

"People are just shells," I explained, "a collection of cells that make thoughts and move muscles. When we die, nothing happens. We just stop being."

At first, she was patient, urging me to consider the possibility that there was something special about the people living inside that shell. I resisted, stubborn in what I

felt I was old enough to claim. I wavered when I noticed her tears. I questioned my approach, wondering if I'd come on a little strong.

“Did I ever tell you what happened to my real mom?” she asked. “Or, what happened after?”

I shook my head. I knew my biological grandmother as my ‘mom’s mom.’ I had heard enough stories to know that my mom’s mom died when she was young, but the conversation always wandered towards my grandfather, O.W., known in the family as ‘Oh-Dub.’

I knew that my mom’s mom was pregnant with my oldest aunt when O.W. was shipped to the Pacific Theatre to fight in the final months of World War II. I knew that O.W. received a letter telling him she had given birth to that oldest aunt and, later that same afternoon, watched from the glass bubble of his bombardier’s seat as his best friend’s B-24 took a flak round to the wing and disintegrated over the ocean. From there, the stories were always about O.W. and the nine lives my mom and her sisters were convinced he had. They’d talk about the war, the time he braided his bed sheets together and repelled from the third floor of a burning hotel, or the afternoon the neighbor’s house exploded due to a gas leak and they watched my grandfather run into the flaming rubble to save the screaming man trapped in his shower. Sometimes, they talked about Opal, his second wife and the person I called grandma; her foreign service or her bright sense of humor that eventually won them over after she married my grandfather.

The most substantial connection I shared with my mom’s mom was the index card my own mother kept in the worn clamshell box of recipes, on the shelf with her cookbooks and culinary magazines. The recipe was for caramel rolls, called ‘gooey rolls’

in the Hanes clan. The card's simple instructions, penciled in neat script, rose to the status of family legacy. Every aunt, even my great one, had their own interpretation of my biological grandmother's creation. At every family gathering, someone would make two batches—one to be left on the counter and one to be hidden in the back of the fridge in a futile attempt to stall O.W.'s talent for consuming an entire tray in an afternoon. I knew whose handwriting was on the index card because I had been told, but I never heard anyone explicitly talk about my mom's mom until the night I told my mother I didn't believe in God.

“She was very, very sick,” my mom explained.

Such careful generalizations were an awkward departure from the candor that I was familiar with. Still, I listened as she told me about her mom's decades-long struggle with clinical depression and the endless sessions of electroshock therapy that, combined with a heavy lithium regiment, left her mom vapid and confined to the couch, unable to recognize her children for hours or days after each treatment session. One afternoon, during my mom's first year of law school, her mother made a batch of caramel rolls and laced the dough with enough barbiturates to stop her heart. She made a small batch, just for her, so there wouldn't be any leftovers someone could mistake for a parting gift.

“She was in so much pain,” my mom told me. “She just couldn't handle it anymore.”

In the months that followed, my mom and her sisters helped prop up their father. My mom moved back in with him, and almost collapsed under the pressure of helping her dad while trying to process her own grief.

“One night, when I was asleep, my mom came to me,” she told me. “She was beautiful, healthy, and she wasn’t sick anymore. She was the way I remembered her growing up, like an angel. She told me how much she loved me.”

As she told me this, my mom’s voice cracked and wobbled, but she pushed forward.

“I know there’s something else in there,” she said, pointing towards my chest. “There has to be something else in there. God sent her to see me, I know it.”

I believed then, as I do now, that my mom found faith in a dream. However, as I hugged her that night, I relinquished my protest against the catechism classes. She assured me, when I had seen them through, she would respect whatever conclusion I arrived at with the God she believed in. I never did find her God, but, from that point, I never doubted the sincerity of her beliefs.

Last Thanksgiving, my family met at my sister’s home in Denver. My mom made the drive from Montana, pulling a rented trailer behind her S.U.V. My sister had gotten married and could claim all of the responsibilities of a proud homeowner, so my mom determined that my sister was also old enough to take all of the detritus preserved from her childhood. My mom called me while she was trying to kill a corner of Wyoming. I figured any amount of Wyoming was as good a place as any, and decided to ask my mom why, when I was 12, she decided to quit her job as a prosecutor. I asked if she got burned out, or fell victim to office politics.

“Not at all,” she said. “Things were going great. I had a spectacular caseload, great press, and I was chair of the Montana Democratic Party.”

The last accolade was new information to me.

“It was Tom,” she said, without hesitation. “Over those two years, he became an unbearable asshole. It was like he despised us, didn’t want anything to do with us.”

I told her I remembered it, thinking of my own timeline. She was talking about the same period where Tom insisted I take another shot at downing my pseudo-swallowed soup.

“I thought it was because I was gone all the time, travelling for cases or the democratic party. I decided to quit law and went to someone in the party. I told them I needed a part time job so I could focus on my family. I thought if I was around more, it might make things better. Then, 6 months later, I caught him in his first affair and it started to make sense.”

She kept going, tracing her entrance into politics, when she again started crisscrossing the state most weekends. Then, she doubled back.

“We had a few really great years,” she said, referring to our time in Iowa and the first year after our move.

“I know,” I told her. “Regardless of what happened, I can’t pretend he wasn’t a part of my life.”

She sighed, then took a moment to think.

“It makes sense. I mean, look at my own fucked up twenties. That stuff informs who you are, good or bad.”

I assured her it wasn’t all bad.

“I’ve felt guilty for 20 years,” she admitted. “For marrying him, and for not leaving the first time he cheated. I always think about you and Kate, having to be alone

with him. I remember once, when I walked into the garage, I caught him screaming at you in this horrible tone. As soon as he saw me, he did a backflip and started speaking to you like he knew he was supposed to.”

It took a moment, but I placed the example. Excited to adjust the trucks on a new skateboard, I borrowed a few wrenches from Tom’s tool chest and, task accomplished, abandoned them on the work bench for a test ride. When he found them, it wasn’t like when I forgot to put away borrowed tools from my dad’s workbench in Iowa. There was no instruction, just anger. When my mom walked in, he switched to words like ‘responsibility’ and placed the tools back in the drawer to illustrate their proper place.

“But, then we wouldn’t have known the boys,” she said. “We wouldn’t have moved to Montana. Sometimes, I think about what would’ve happened if I stayed with him for good. Maybe Jack would even be alive.”

“That’s not fair to put on yourself,” I told her.

“Maybe you’re right. If we wouldn’t have moved, you and Kate wouldn’t be the same. Maybe some things would have been better, but you wouldn’t have had your brothers or your friends.”

“I wouldn’t have traded it for anything else,” I said.

I meant what I told her, and lingered on it after we said goodbye.

After arriving in Denver, my mom unloaded the trailer in my sister’s garage, stacking the white evidences boxes full of childhood drawings and elementary school stories in a sagging wall. I flew there to meet her and the rest of the family a few days later.

The night before Thanksgiving, while sitting around the coffee table in my sister's living room, we decided to sort through one of the boxes. We found a booklet my sister penned in the 4th grade, and laughed as she read the blunt explanation of my mother and father's decision to switch from a real to artificial Christmas tree because they feared I, even as a toddler, would find a way to start any real tree on fire. We sorted through the rest of the box, condemning to the trash the lesser projects or anything decorated with 20-year-old Fruit Loops. With one box demolished, I went to the garage to retrieve another. Nestled in all those labelled for my sister, I found one marked for me. I brought my box inside with one of the others.

Inside my box, draped over a pile of kindergarten drawings and construction paper Christmas decorations, I found the baby blanket I had long written off as a casualty to some forgotten laundry error, or maybe a failure in litter box marksmanship notorious to several of our many cats. But, I was wrong, and I pulled the blanket from the box. It was in surprisingly good shape and just how I remembered it—framed with a blue border like a stegosaurus' back and populated by a colony of cartoon bunnies holding hands. From the other couch, my mom's face softened into a smile, and she chuckled as she mentioned how attached I had been to that blanket. She asked if I had ever heard the story of how I got it, and I told her I couldn't remember.

"I tried a horrific neglect case," she said. "But, at that time in Iowa, the legal recourse for neglect as abuse wasn't fleshed out."

When she told me about the case, autopsy slides flashed through my mind. I remembered those of the adolescent boy who died when an unattended bowel impaction ruptured his stomach and he went septic, perishing slowly over several days until his

guardians found his body under the covers of his bed. The boy's stomach was so distended it looked like a late term pregnancy. My mom had to take the case to a grand jury, who would recommend whether the case could be tried successfully.

“I was pregnant with you,” my mom said. “One of the grand jury members made that for you while I was presenting the case. She gave it to me on the last day, when they recommended charges be filed.”

A few weeks later, my mom won that case. Both parents were given life sentences. A while after the case, I was born, swaddled in the bunny blanket when my mother and father brought me home. As I learned to walk, I carried the blanket everywhere. I was joined with that blanket for years, well beyond the time my folks made the choice to switch Christmas tree styles. When I went to preschool, the bunny blanket came with me. I cried and screamed when my mom wrote my name in permanent marker on the white cotton background, determined to halt an act of such defilement. That blanket was my companion, and I even brought it in the car when our family drove from Iowa to Montana. But, I had never asked where it came from. I never cared or questioned, as long I had it when naptime came around.

When I flew home from Denver, the blanket flew with me. At home, I left it draped over the back of the couch for a few days before I folded it and stored it, wrapped in a plastic bag and sealed in the safety of an attic-bound plastic crate. I don't want anything to happen to it. Sure, I want to preserve that token of what I valued most when I was younger. But, I also want to protect that blanket more now that I know its origin. As a kid, I never cared about where it came from because I didn't understand how it could be so connected to something else, brought into being as a result of such a vile, abusive

circumstance. Now, that makes me appreciate it more, to see a few strands of the web of my being and how I'm connected to other people, even those I've never met and never will.

When I think of that blanket, it's not much different from when I think of Tom, or the family that I knew while growing up. I was not like the boy shackled to the cot that my mother remembers in fierce detail, and to make any claim that I was would be incorrect. One of the only things that I can still lend to Tom's credit is that he never hit us. But, to see him for who he was when I knew him is to see everything else—the scene that my mom insists is so vital to any case. I see the adventures in the hillside behind my house. I remember rattlesnake heads, and Jack chiseling our common initial into stone. I see, next to the fort, the burnt tree, still dead and gnarled when I was 20 years old and I watched from as distance as Tom spread Jack's ashes there. Tom is, on one level, a study in contrasts, a depiction of all the valences of personality. To remember only him at his most snakelike, slamming his fist on the table or charming the room, is to deny all of that goodness and genuine wonder I knew.

Nona's

Nona was kneading a ball of biscuit dough on the tile countertop, clods of flour and milk sticking to the trimmed fingernails of her saddle-worn hands. Nona's son, Matt, my closest friend, was in the dining room, arguing with his older brother John about a fork's proper place in the table setting. Nona glanced up from her kneading, making sure I was still there.

"I am not your mother and I don't plan to be," she said, her voice thick with her Alabama upbringing. "I'm not going to wake you up for school and I'm not going to ask if you did your homework."

I nodded as Nona explained that, if my cat and I were going to live in her basement while I finished my senior year of high school, she'd need rent. She wasn't trying to make money, just trying not to spend it. She outlined my responsibilities, making sure I understood that I wasn't absolved from household contributions. I would pay a share of the grocery bill. Nona would not assign chores, but chores would have to be done, more so over weekends when she drove the 100 miles to Grass Range to help her partner, Gilles, with his ranch. If she left on a Thursday, the house should look the same when she returned Monday night.

"Thank you," I said, "for all of this."

Nona stopped cutting biscuits from the sheet of dough, flipping the floured wine glass in her hand and setting it on the tile. "When I had cancer, your mom never hesitated to take care of Matt. I owe her one."

Nona was diagnosed when Matt and I were 12, three years after his parents resigned from managing the N Bar Ranch and Matt's father disappeared to Texas,

starting a new family without informing his other one. On the nights following a round of chemo to treat her breast cancer, Nona would send Matt through the drainage ditch that halved our quiet, suburban enclave. He would knock on my front door and, without question, be offered a bowl of whatever was on the stove or in the freezer. Sometimes, even on school nights, he would sleep in the bunk bed above mine.

I never realized that time as a debt. Even so, it was already paid. When I started high school, my mom travelled frequently for work and my relationship with my former stepfather stalled on a bad road. On nights when I couldn't stand him, I would walk the drainage ditch, cutting through the neat rows of our neighborhood to the unlocked front door of Nona's split-level house. Nona would set an extra place at the table, never asking if I wanted to stay. After dinner, Matt and I rushed upstairs to feed leftover strips of catfish to Moses, the orphaned fox that Nona found next to its dead mother while walking fenceline at Gilles ranch. We let Moses lick the scraps of cornmeal breading from our fingers. When licking turned to biting, Moses had to return to Gilles' to live a semi-domesticated life.

A decade later, I was back in Nona's kitchen as a stray. My mom had moved to D.C. the previous summer, yielding to the demands of a new career and a new relationship after she divorced Tom. I decided not to follow her.

I didn't know what to say to Nona, heavy with the fear that I was taking advantage of her. Nona wiped her hands and reached for a stack of glasses from the cupboard.

"It's okay," she said, handing me the glasses. "Remember, I love you, but you're not my son. Now, please, help the boys set the table."

Nona slid the pan of biscuits into the oven as I took the glasses to the dining room, where Matt and John's debate had evolved to consider hypothetical dessert spoons. Soon, the four of us ferried platters from the kitchen and sat around the worn oak table, passing the perennial jug of fresh sweet tea so we could fill our glasses. This was my first night in Nona's house; my first real night with a tomorrow attached. The discomfort of feeling like an intruder crowded every interaction, but the business of our arrangement had been broached and then left behind as we each took a chicken fried steak, still scalding from the cast iron skillet. The table, the dining room, the veteran tablecloth with wax stains from the candles—all were familiar, but nothing closed the gap between guest and resident like the food and the people sharing it.

Nona's chicken fried steak was elusive, appearing only during special occasions. Knives were unnecessary; the sides of our forks crackled through crisp coatings to tender beef. We spooned heaps from a mound of okra, lightly battered and fried into the silk-smooth crunch that I had come to love since first trying it at that table years before. Potatoes mashed with cream, butter and salt mounded from our plates. They were spared garlic, truffle, or anything else that could distract from their ordained purpose as a vehicle for that speckled pan gravy, coaxed from the lard used to fry the steaks. A plate of steaming biscuits changed hands so often it barely touched the table, chased by a jar of jam made from the raspberries that swelled from a small corner of the yard. Those biscuits called to us over the cloudy streaks of gravy on our empty plates, reassuring all that one more couldn't hurt. We sat at the table, laughing, reaching for a biscuit or pausing for another sip of sweet tea before Matt and I stood to start the dishes.

In the following weeks, I succumbed to both the class schedule for my senior year at Billings West High and the staccato rhythm of our busy home. Matt and I worked at a pizza shop downtown. He started his freshman year at the Billings branch of Montana State, motivated by obligation instead of interest and caring more about collecting tips from a night of work than attending class. I spent most evenings at the pizza shop with him. His brother, John, had just kicked an Oxycontin habit. He lamented his psychology degree from Rocky Mountain College, working as a bartender in a hotel downtown and pouring himself into cheap cocktails while he figured out his next step. When Nona wasn't at the ranch, she counseled through equine therapy, assisting youth who struggled along the blurred lines of behavioral disorders or had their names on file somewhere in the Juvenile Probation Office of the county courthouse.

Despite the chaos, Nona would send an afternoon text message at least once a week, "Dinner at 7." Nona's kitchen was not a restaurant and we were not guests who could amble into the lobby twenty minutes after our reservation, swollen with the self-importance. Dinner at seven meant gathering in the kitchen by at least six, ready to knead biscuit dough, mash potatoes, or jump at any chance to help. Excuses and tardiness were reciprocated with tasks like standing on the porch in the frigid dark of a Billings winter as a flank steak seared on the grill, watching for flare ups that only seemed to risk catching the side of the house on fire when we were late. But, these infractions were rare. Matt, John and I knew we were fortunate for those meals. We all wanted to be there, to grab hold of the anchor offered to us in the middle of our hectic weeks.

Though she was caring, Nona was often withdrawn. She would make her expectations clear but hardly give an inch more, shielded by a wrought iron confidence that sometimes flashed with eccentricity.

Once after dinner, Matt and I went to the garage, fussing over the cylinder head from my old motorcycle that spent more time on the workbench than the road. When frustration drove us to a break, I lit a cigarette and Matt hoisted himself onto the seat of his older and sturdier Yamaha. Nona walked in from the front yard, cellphone buried in her black curls as she talked with her sister. Without breaking her conversation, Nona plucked the cigarette from my mouth, took a deep drag, and coughed once before returning the smoke with a smile and walking inside. Matt and I were silent, disbelieving. Later, we asked if she had decided to take up smoking.

“I just wanted to remind myself why I quit,” she said. She pointed to me. “You seem to be doing it all the time, so I wondered if I was missing out.”

Nona took a similarly casual approach to the small bud of weed she kept in a 35mm film canister. Appearing towards the end of her chemotherapy treatments, that cannister floated, unopened, between baskets of other junk in a kitchen drawer for years. At first, Matt and I were shocked, but Nona brushed it off.

“Who's going to care?” she said. “If anyone throws a fit about it, I can just play the cancer card.”

As Matt and I grew into our teenage selves, our shock morphed into curiosity. Occasionally, we would ask if Nona had indulged in the junk drawer pot. Always, she said she wasn't ready, that she had never smoked it because she was “just too chicken.”

Nona defied domesticity. Nonetheless, with the schedules we kept when I lived at Nona's house, the most consistent time we all gathered was when we were preparing a meal. The only measuring device in Nona's kitchen was a Pyrex liquid measuring cup, the red gradients long faded and the glass hazed from years of being used to brew sweet tea concentrate in the microwave.

In the kitchen of my childhood, recipe cards scribbled with casserole recipes from our lineage of Midwestern Lutherans mingled with open issues of *Bon Appétit*. Neither was held to a higher standard, but all were subject to the careful precision of a measuring cup. Modifications were approved on a case by case basis and were subject to intense peer review.

At Nona's house, I bought a set of measuring cups for the meals I prepared alone, but finding those measuring cups became a scavenger hunt. They were pushed to the back of drawers or discarded in bottom cupboards. They disappeared from the plastic ring holding them together, one at a time. I would find the missing cup in the bag of kibble in the garage. Eventually, every measuring cup was repurposed for the three dogs; Jill, the retired border collie who lounged instead of herded, Sadie, the electric huskie, and Rooster Cogburn, Yorkshire terrier and lap dog to only Nona, who could invoke an assault of anxious barks any time she left Rooster in another room.

Without measuring cups and eager to learn, I tried to embrace Nona's approach to cooking. A few months after moving in, I asked if she could show me how to make biscuits. I couldn't fathom that she just mixed Bisquick with milk, judging amounts by the consistency of the dough. When it came time to bake them, I asked how long she left them in the oven.

“Until they’re done,” she shrugged.

For years after, I tried to mimic that method, as well as more complicated ones, with little success. I could produce a decent batch, but none that could compare. Mine were too dry, too big, too browned on top, or filled with grocery store jam that tasted more like sugar than fruit.

But, in the time I spent with Matt’s family, Nona was not the only one expected to cook. That spring, I returned from a fishing trip in Iowa with my father, checking a cooler of frozen walleye at the airport instead of my duffle bag. Later that week, I let the fish soak in an egg bath while I mixed a batch of my father’s breading. I fried the strips of fish in a cast iron pool of oil, Matt mixed a bowl of tartar sauce, and John fried potatoes. It was the first time they tasted walleye. After that meal, I was dispatched to Cooney Reservoir to pull as many walleye from the water as I legally could.

Our weekly meals could be experimental depending on who controlled the stove. Matt was an emerging cook who used our rare nights at the dinner table as opportunities to test new recipes. One favorite was a pile of oxtails, braised in a pressure cooker with fresh ginger, brown bean sauce, and star anise. We tore through the pile, throwing the bones into the empty pot in the center of the table. Throughout the meal, all of us danced around euphemisms about the little starred spice that gave the oxtails a hint of black licorice, careful to avoid any slips.

“Anise is really deceiving,” Matt chuckled. “A really robust, distinct flavor, but it’s mellower that you think it will be.”

I turned the word over in my head at every reference, fighting to remind myself which one was which. I did this so much that I lost track of my pronunciations as we left

the jokes behind and stood to clear the table. Sounding it out, my mouth opened before my mind could stop it.

“Anus!”

Everyone froze. I made it through the entire meal, almost.

Nona was the first to crack, a giggle flowing into a cascade of laughter. Matt and John followed. I scrambled to try and explain myself, to impart that I was just trying to remind myself what *not* to say. I only succeeded in turning sunset red. Nona had to step outside because she couldn't stop laughing, a common end to our dinners full of long stories, bad jokes and crude jabs. It was how we preferred to end them, happy that we found one night to be together. It was rhythm that we counted on through winter and spring, and the foundation I leaned against some nights while I sat on the railing of the front porch, smoking and staring up the gulch towards my childhood home.

Sometimes, I could see the lights from my old house reflecting off the base of the Rims, and I knew Tom was there, alone. I would put my cigarette out and leave him behind, going back inside the house that would have me. Nona's house was tired—cracked tiles collected grime on the kitchen counter, the carpet sprouted loose threads between stains, and the couch in the family room needed a deshedding more than the dogs that napped on it. But, these things were just proof of the lives that place sheltered, mine among them. I never felt the urge to wander up the gulch towards my old home.

While those of us living in that home reveled in the rare dinners we shared together, most nights we were scattered across town. And, on the weekends, Matt, John and I had the house to ourselves.

The fall I moved into Nona's house, Matt and I decided to renew a previous interest in organic chemistry by brewing another batch of homemade mead. With John around and of legal age, booze wasn't hard to come by, and we had already tested a mead recipe the previous year that led to streams of high velocity vomit. I had to convince Matt that it was worth trying again, that something must have gone wrong with our last attempt; we could do better. Finally, he relented. One weekend night, we gathered our supplies and took over the kitchen. We simmered honey and water, and, once it had cooled, added yeast. Matt scrounged through the spice cabinet and added cloves and ancient, crumbling sticks of cinnamon to try and tame the bite of the final product.

We poured our base into several two-gallon plastic water jugs, then secured a latex balloon over the mouth of each container. We left the batch to ferment overnight and met again in the kitchen the next morning. The yeast had started to digest the sugars in the honey, producing enough gas to lift each balloon to attention. We took a safety pin, sterilized it with a lighter, and poked a hole in each balloon, assuring ourselves that the escaping gas would prevent outside bacteria from causing a tainted taste or sudden blindness. Then, we each took three jugs and placed them in the back of our closet. Over the next several months, our batch of homemade wine withstood the ebb and flow of dirty laundry and, in the spring, we decided it must be ready to drink.

To celebrate our accomplishment, we invited our friends to our closet mead tasting. One Saturday, while Nona was at the ranch, all of us gathered in the backyard. Having some forethought, Matt and I left one of the jugs to chill in the freezer that afternoon. But, as everyone followed their first sip with a string of coughs and an odd retch, we came to the conclusion that temperature made no difference. Still, we

persevered, sitting on the back porch while we forced down gulps of our battery acid wine.

When John arrived home from his shift at the bar, he found us in the backyard. His face lit up when he saw that we had finally tapped our supply. He grabbed one of the jugs, took a massive swig, and fought a heave.

“You want something else?” Matt asked.

“Fuck no,” John said. He plopped down in a patio chair, the jug between his legs.

Soon, the horror of the blackout fuel we created snuck up on us. Our friends retreated into the house, one at a time, crashing on the floor or wherever else their confused bodies gave up and collapsed. John and Matt were the last ones, leaving me outside, alone. I took a final sip from a jug someone else had abandoned. The rest of the night came in flashes - puking on the lawn and the edge of the garden, stumbling inside, seeing John asleep in an armchair, Matt passed out on the couch across the room, somehow naked.

The next afternoon, I made my way upstairs. Matt was in the kitchen, in his underwear, washing the dirty dishes that had sprouted around the kitchen over the weekend. We grunted a good morning to each other as I grabbed a clean dish towel and began to dry. We ignored the automatic dishwasher because Nona refused to accept its adequacy over a bit of elbow grease and a sponge. Even on Sunday afternoons, before Nona returned from the ranch, we couldn't get away with using it. If we tried, she would leave the door to the dishwasher open and the drawers extended as a signal to us that the dishes needed to be rewashed by hand. We didn't mind. Every Sunday, Matt, John and I

met in the kitchen to wash the dishes and clean up. It was the ritual that brought us back to earth from the orbit of our weekends.

That afternoon, John met Matt and me in the kitchen as we were finishing the dishes. He gathered the trash, then shuffled around the house to collect whatever was left of the mead. We agreed that it was best for everyone if we destroyed our hellspawn, so we emptied the jugs over the edge of the back porch. In the next few weeks we learned that while we made terrible wine, we had brewed a passable herbicide. The mead we dumped and my vomit from the night before killed patches of the back lawn and managed to wilt a few of the generally impervious sunflowers in the corner of the garden.

Spring turned towards summer and, one night, Nona came home from the ranch wearing an engagement ring from Gilles. She brushed off any big plans, mentioning an appointment at the courthouse a few weeks later. Then, she asked Matt, John and me if we would be witnesses during the ceremony.

On a weekday in early June, we all met in the living room. The boys wore ties and stiff shirts above dark blue jeans. Nona wore a sundress that Gilles had brought her from a trip to Ethiopia. The only things missing were Gilles and his mother, Elvia. They were running late and the spotty cell phone service on the drive from Grass Range meant we couldn't find out what was keeping them.

We gathered around the island in the kitchen, our elbows resting on the glass stove top that was cracked in places and scarred by cast iron. Nona opened a bottle of bourbon and poured each of us a glass.

Just after 4:30, we heard Gilles truck pull into the driveway and we scurried to collect ourselves. Gilles flew through the front door, thundered across the hardwood floor, and stopped in the kitchen. Gilles keeps a box of dynamite for clearing beaver dams above the bench grinder in his shop. He chuckled at the horrified looks Matt and I wore the first time we saw him send a shower of sparks close to that box while grinding a piece of angle iron. Trying to catch his breath in Nona's kitchen, Gilles wore that same look, of a person convinced they are about to explode. He started to speak. Before he could, Nona turned him around and pushed him towards the door, kicking him into a trot and following him outside.

Nona got into the truck with Gilles and Elvia while we raced towards Matt's Jeep. Watching the clock, we drove across Billings. We parked and helped Elvia into the courthouse while Nona and Gilles ran inside. When we reached the courtroom, the door was locked. The attendant's window was still lit, but nobody answered when we rang the bell on the counter. We waited for Nona to speak. Instead, she smiled.

"Looks like we get to celebrate two days in a row," she said.

We helped Elvia back into the truck and climbed into Matt's Wrangler, cruising home. The top was down and the doors were off. I set my foot on the bottom of the door frame and let my head lean out the side, catching the wind and the fresh, green evening of my last June in Billings.

At the house, we loosened our ties, poured glasses of bourbon, and went to work. John seared the flank steak. Matt and I handled the potatoes and the fried okra. Nona and Gilles sat at the table, the fear falling from Gilles' white, caterpillar eyebrows as she took his hand.

All of us sat at the table long after our plates were clear and our stomachs full. We listened as Elvia told stories in her French accent like melted chocolate. She lived in a house next to Gilles that she and her husband, Bill, had built from lodge poles on the property, using rebar for door handles and plastering polished stones from the nearby creek into the doorframes. When Matt and I would go pheasant hunting at the ranch, we were obligated to pay the ‘pheasant tax,’ which meant stopping by Elvia’s on our way out to leave a few pheasant breasts in her freezer.

Around the table after the almost wedding, we listened as she told us about her time in Nazi occupied France. She lived in Paris, but would ride her bicycle several days towards the coast to reach a friend’s farm, where she could stock up on the dairy items rationed in the city. On one trip during the first week of June, she woke in the middle of the night and heard a rustling in the barn. She woke her friend, and they went to investigate. When they opened the barn door, they found a group of soldiers from the 101st Airborne who were unsure of where they were—they had missed their drop zone. They showed the soldiers the nearest landmark and left them with some cheese, promising to keep their secret. The next morning, Elvia left for Paris.

“I went for some milk and left with the biggest secret of my life,” she said, talking through the last bite of a biscuit.

We asked how she met Bill, knowing that he was a soldier stationed in France. She responded with a declaration that it was time for her to lie down on the couch. Matt helped her there, and then we cleared the plates.

Then, Matt, John and I found ourselves on sitting on the back porch, comfortable between the wild tangles of sunflowers on either side and staring at the lawn where we

used to unroll sleeping bags on summer nights during our childhood. We split cigarettes and sipped from our glasses, watching the last of the sunset.

The next day, we had a roast chicken instead of steak and an actual wedding instead of a dry run. Again, we sat on the back porch, watching the sky.

We spent most of the summer on that porch as our friends trickled away to whatever campus called them. When it was my time to leave, I packed my car and readied for the drive to Iowa, where I would unload the boxes into my father's basement and catch a flight to Seattle to start school. Matt talked about transferring to the University of Montana. He found a second job as a barback where John worked, saving his money for the move.

We had our last dinner a few days before I left, eating chicken fried steak and treating it like any other occasion. Nona didn't mention much about me leaving. On my last night in her house, I was alone. Nona was asleep and Matt came home late from a shift at the bar, drifting off in a chair before he could finish a beer. I woke him, we said our goodbyes, and he went to bed.

I emerged from the basement just before sunrise, a duffle bag on my shoulder and my cat tucked in my arm. I walked through the kitchen, where Nona had left a thermos of sweet tea and a plastic bag of biscuits marked with my name. Outside, I climbed into my dented SUV, rattling out of the driveway before I followed Rimrock Road to the edge of town. Near the city limits, I parked in the shoulder of the road. I gave myself a moment to cry for the town I was leaving, wondering when I would be back. The family I knew by blood had all wandered off and, over holidays, would take priority over the family I had come to know by other means.

I called my mom. I wanted to tell her that it was worth it to stay. I didn't have a reason when I left her in D.C., but I had found one since. Instead, I told her how excited I was to see her in Seattle the following weekend, where she'd meet me to help with the move. I hung up the phone, merged onto the interstate, and drove east over the grasslands of eastern Montana, baked fragile brown in the heat of my last summer there.

In the years after I left, Matt and John also moved. Nona and I don't talk much, but I have seen her few times. She put down Jill, the retired border collie, when she could no longer walk on her own. Nona did it herself, making the dog a bowl of ground sirloin and pan gravy and then carrying her into the hills towards the heart of the ranch. She brought one of Gilles' rifles and waited until the dog fell asleep in the grass before pulling the trigger. It was quick and, according to Nona, it was right because, "she grew up on a ranch and she deserved to die on one." Then, she adopted a magpie named Maggie who had fallen from her nest. Maggie started a collection of Nona's jewelry on top of the fridge and sat at the table, waiting for Nona to slide her a scrap of food. When it came time for Maggie to be released, the bird joined her fellow magpies at the ranch, but she returned to the dinner table on the front porch every evening for a few summers, at least.

Nona sold the house a few years ago. The neighbors began to complain when Nona packed the fenced backyard with bum lambs from the ranch, brought home so she could care for them. According to her, being on a first name basis with the local animal control officers is a good sign it's time to move. Then, Rooster the terrier stopped

walking too. Nona took him to the vet, admitting that she couldn't bring herself to put down another dog alone.

Now, when I see Nona, it is always at the ranch. Matt and I ride ATVs down to the creek, dropping metal traps filled with dog kibble into the water. In the evening, we pull the traps and bring home the crayfish, purging them in tap water. Before Elvia passed, we drove across the lawn to pick her up because she could no longer make the journey across the yard on her own. Now, we're one place setting short, but we've also gained a few in recent years. Matt, John and I bring our partners with us to the ranch, and all of us crowd around the table except Gilles, who spits French curses at the lamb chops burning on the grill. We pick apart the boiled crawfish, cringing at the mud that no amount of lemon, butter or Old Bay can mask. But, we try them every time. We eat and we laugh, and then we sit on the porch, sipping chokecherry brandy that Gilles distills in his shop.

Before I go, Nona pulls me aside. She gives me a hug. She tells me, "it's good having you home." I leave wrapped up in that last word.

Home, Again

I dig my fingernails into my palms, walk towards the front door, and knock. I turn, ready to give up, when the door cracks. She pokes her head out. They don't get many knocks around here.

"Can I help you?"

I stumble over words, apologize for apologizing. "Someone I knew died here two years ago today."

She winces. "We had two that summer," she says.

"He was the first one," I reply.

"I remember him, but I don't remember you."

I can hear my car running, waiting for me to give up and run away.

"It's complicated," I tell her. "He was my brother, for a while."

She opens the door and steps onto the porch.

"Of course," she says. "Take the time you need."

I walk down the access road leading from the ranch manager's home to the river, then pick my way down the bank where they must've hauled him out and tried CPR. There's an eddy; clear, cold and swollen with June snowmelt. I walk in up to my calves and the frigid water needles between my toes. Cottonwoods hang over the bank, the whisper of their leaves drowned in the whitewater. The one lane bridge is just how I remember it, its support column steadfast in the middle of the river, water chugging and swirling and pulling around it, waiting for a rope to snag and a body to swallow. I wonder if the other brothers have been here since he died. I haven't talked to them since the funeral, and I wonder if I will again. The youngest had a kid—even named him Joe. I

wonder if he'll grow up hearing stories about me, like the ones my kids will hear about them if I ever have children.

I tuck two cigarettes into an empty pack and nestle it under a boulder.

“Sometimes one just isn't enough,” Jack said once, just after he promised me things wouldn't change. Some days, I wish I could call him. Others, I'm almost thankful that I can't. In some ways, it's easier that my memories of him end in this place, frozen in this river where they can't change.

The Language of My Fathers

In the concourse of the Minneapolis Airport, I stop, as always, in front of an advertisement for the state of Minnesota: a photograph of a loon floating in a patch of leaning wild rice stalks. She has been looking at that sun for at least 20 years, the gold and pink of a Minnesota sunset reflecting off the surface of the lake in positive contrast to her black and white feathers. I have passed her on hundreds of connecting flights from Des Moines, where my dad lives, to Montana, where I grew up with my mother, and after, flights from Seattle, where I live now.

I stop because it reminds me of the cabin passed down from my great-grandfather to my grandfather and his sister. My grandfather's half passed to my father and his brothers. I think of my father, my grandfather, and me, sitting together on those worn porch chairs on summer evenings, a portrait of the evolution of a Midwestern man. My grandfather, 'Senior' because he is the first Joe, stirs his cocktail, flicking his ring finger against floating ice cubes and then resting his hand on his substantial belly. My father, the second Joe, pats the Iowa Hawkeyes logo over his modest stomach and adjusts his glasses under thick chestnut hair. Wiry like they used to be, I, the third Joe, show up with my head shaved or mohawked, piercings dotting my face and a band logo across my t-shirt instead of a mascot.

My father and his father, both in residential real estate, had to sell most of their valuables when the market crashed. They clung, barely, to their houses and their fishing boats. They managed to hang on to the cabin for a few years until my father called, his voice heavy and labored with wine, saying they didn't have a choice. My grandfather had

a desk at the office but he couldn't earn an income and they couldn't earn one for him. The cabin on Woman Lake was no longer ours.

I heard no plans. I had not been there to try and talk anyone out of it. Maybe that's why my father didn't tell me before they reached a compromise. The land was worth more without the old cabin sitting on it, so they sold the several hundred feet of shoreline and woods on the south side of the lot that, in the 1940s, came cheap. My great aunt, Pudd, retained the side with the cabin, though she never used it. She financed an addition to keep pace with our new neighbor, an Iowa farmer who struck gold commercializing pig meat. At least we get to use it as long as we pay half of the bills.

I nod my head at the photo of the loon, hike my backpack onto my shoulder, and walk down the concourse, the fly rod strapped to my backpack rubbing my elbow with each step. I pass through the security doors to the baggage claim, calling my father. He says he'll be a while, that he had to meet with the doctors looking over Senior.

"They found something. It's called a Glioblastoma or something," he says, struggling to pronounce the word.

"What does that mean?"

He tells me it could be months, but probably less. They're going to try and remove it the next morning, but my grandfather's doctor is worried his body won't be able to handle the trauma.

"Should we go back to Des Moines?" I ask, heaving my black duffel from the carousel.

"I don't want to, but I think we probably should. You should call him. He's awake."

My grandfather picks up the phone and I ask him how he is. An oxygen tube has dried his vocal cords, making his voice sound like sandpaper running over balsa wood.

“Never tried brain surgery,” he says, “but I don’t think I’ll like it much.”

“I think we’re going to head for home.”

“Gawd dammit!” he barks, a staple phrase. My father and I sometimes joke about how, even from three rooms over, the length of the first word tells us exactly how far away we should run. Today, it is short. A sympathetic anger.

“I don’t want to hear it,” he says. “Go up there with your dad. I’ll call you in the morning to see about your catch.”

“You know we’ll come down if we need to.”

“I know you will,” he says.

I sit alone in the chair at baggage claim until my dad arrives, towing his fishing boat around the sharp turns and high curbs of the passenger pick up area. I step into a brisk October breeze and we hug.

“He said we should go,” I say.

“Then we should go.” He opens the trunk.

I throw my bag into the back of his Suburban and we head north, the four-lane interstate and flat prairie farmland of southern Minnesota transforming into the twists of a narrow, two-lane blacktop, ferns reaching onto the road weaving through white birch that dwarf the fir trees. The sky is a grey slate pressing from beyond the tree line. We pass through St. Cloud, Nisswa, and Pine River, towns with ‘closed’ signs hanging over the painted letters of gift shop storefronts after the departure of the summer resort crowds. For a while, there isn’t much talk.

“You can’t beat the fall fishing,” my dad says. “But, there’s not much use for a fly rod up here.”

“Out west, fly fishermen think it’s too easy. I want to see where the worlds meet, maybe catch some walleye on a fly.”

“You can tell those people out west that they don’t know about hard fishing until they try to catch a walleye on a 95-degree day, but if you do any good, maybe I’ll have to get one.”

We stop at the Mule Lake Store, a gas station and bait shop where we rented movies and bought frozen pizza and would pester the old owners, Mike and Patty, about fishing reports. They sold two years ago, so the man who rings up our minnows and worms doesn’t ask about Senior.

We follow the road past the Hunters Bay Lodge, shuttered and pending redevelopment into private lots. Finally, we turn left onto a dirt road, tree branches skimming the roof as we crest the hill onto the long driveway to the cabin, passing a sign that my grandfather made; a series of wooden planks strung together, gray with passing seasons and scrawled with white letters reading *Welcome to Windy Hill – Kirk Family*. The trees part to show the cabin, slanted with age. Next to it, a new mansion tries to disguise itself as a cabin where our woods used to be.

“Jesus,” my dad says.

Somewhere on that lot, there used to be a tree, young when I was young, still green when I peeled back thin bark. Before I was 10, I took a rusty hatchet from the shed. I was determined to chop down a tree and my father and my grandfather giggled on the porch as I disappeared among the ferns. They knew the hatchet was dull. I found the ash

and hacked at its middle until my arms gave out and I dropped the hatchet under heavy breaths, not even a quarter of the way through, and sulked back to the porch. That tree grew with me, scars from the hatchet on the trunk. I would find it every year, making sure that it was still growing. I used to sneak cigarettes behind it when I was a teenager. I was there when the man in the backhoe came to tear the trees down. It was a week filled with the stressed explosions of century old tree trunks.

“They build a million-dollar house, and they paint it shit brown?” I ask, staring at the mansion towering over the ends of our old lot.

“I hear the guy’s pretty nice,” my dad says. “He called your grandfather in the hospital yesterday. I also heard he bought a float plane and hired a guy to fly him up here on weekends.”

“That fucker,” I say.

“Fuck, indeed,” my dad says.

Dwarfed by the mansion, our cabin used to be a two-bedroom matchbox with a screened in porch sloping over a settling foundation. Now, the natural amber of the log siding has been painted a lazy shade of rust. Some is ripped off to reveal the black sheeting of a bulging addition, where Pudd decided to build another bedroom, bathroom, and a mud room with an extra door to the outside.

My father and I get out of the truck and walk to the porch. Leaves skitter around our feet, worked up by a breeze coming off the lake. I look down, see my father’s initials, carved into the path under his father’s guiding hand when the porch was added in the 1960s. We open the screen door and my father reaches up, feeling on a rafter for the key to the front door.

The cabin smells like it should, the sweet musk of old carpet, wood smoke, and rain gear hanging in closets for decades. We walk over the linoleum of the galley kitchen, where cast iron skillets hang with layers of fat seasoning from before I was born. In the living room, we see a door next to the fireplace that has never been there and walk into the new bedroom. Its walls are painted a shade of white that makes me squint. There is comfortable carpet and new brass fixtures.

“You want to sleep in here?” I ask my father.

“Hell no,” he says.

We walk out of the bedroom, closing the door for good. I look out the long windows to the lake. Our old path slices across fifty yards of overgrown, steep bank to shoreline. At the bottom, there’s a small sand beach and a wading pool my father built out of stones before I could swim. The flag pole with my sister’s childhood initials pressed in its concrete base is torn from the ground and is leaning over a dock that isn’t ours anymore.

Our dock is now on the other side of the property, barely visible beyond the trees. There is no light, no path beaten into the hillside by three generations. My boat is in its lift, left by one of my uncles who came a week before. It’s my grandfather’s Lund, but I took over the job of maintaining it, undoing the wrongs committed by my boat-clumsy uncles. I changed rock bitten props, replaced trim mangled by forgotten dock lines, checked oil and sparkplugs when they ran the Mercury engine so dry it threatened to seize. My grandfather started calling it my boat when he got sick.

My father places his bag in the bedroom and I drop my bag in the bunkroom, where I have slept since I could sleep on my own, unburdened by the hiss of the water heater at night. Crackling cellophane, my dad throws a frozen pizza in the oven.

Waiting for news from the hospital. There will be no fishing tonight. If we are lucky, we won't hear from them until morning, but even then we may not be so fortunate. We do not watch TV. My dad pours a bourbon for each of us and we sit at the kitchen table, refilling the glasses when they near empty.

"Pudd isn't young," I say, flicking the ice cubes in my glass. "I don't want to sound harsh, but what happens to the cabin when she goes?"

"If she doesn't sell it to leave her daughter some cash," he says, "then she'll leave it to her daughter to sell—he one in Laramie that hasn't been here since high school."

Odds are that my father and I won't ever have the chance or the resources to buy the place back. This is something that both of us know, but neither of us say. I can see that it is hard for him in the way he slouches over the table, staring at the bottom of his glass.

Growing up in Montana, I learned about my father through stories. I heard about how he had totaled seven vehicles belonging to himself, his friends, and his father before he was 25 in wrecks that were 'really I swear' not his fault. He never finished college, dropping out twice because, as he told it the few times it came up, "I never showed up to P.E." My sister and I never learned why he and my mother got a divorce, and never got a real answer when we asked. Instead, I had come to know my father as someone who'd rather fall into a frozen lake—or, at least, tell stories about it—than have an emotionally challenging conversation. But, he did what he could.

During my Junior year of college, the office of financial aid handed me a bill I couldn't pay, and they refused to loan me any more money to pay it. I called my father, who had been out of work for two years, tangled in the non-compete clause buried in his termination agreement that his boss handed him shortly after they demanded he fire my grandfather from the same real estate company. When I told him about the bill, I didn't ask my dad to pay it. I knew he couldn't, and I didn't expect much enthusiasm for an English degree from a man who holds Ronald Reagan as the ultimate model for presidential performance. But, he insisted on cosigning a new loan. When he refused to back down, I thanked him.

"I don't give a shit what you do, as long as you want to do it," he said. "Just promise me you'll never go into sales."

My father and I go to bed, him snoring in the other room as I drift to sleep. As always here, I sleep well, waking just before sunrise. I walk into the kitchen, where my father sits at the table, sipping coffee in his underwear. Pouring myself a cup, I ask if there is any news.

He shakes his head.

"I need to stay, in case. You should go out though. Grandpa will be pissed if you don't have a fishing report for him when he wakes up. God knows it's the first thing he'll ask about. Your rods are on the porch."

I gather a trolling rod and two spinning rods, one outfitted with a simple orange jig tied to monofilament and the other dressed with a Lindy rig. These are my rods, maintained and brought by my father. Once a year, often just after New Year's, he will

call me while sitting at the workbench in his basement to tell me he just re-lined my reels and I will do the same with my cache of gear maintained for his rare trips west. Through the phone, I hear tin static from his AM radio and the rattle and click of crank baits as he reorganizes tackle boxes. The low-light winter days gnaw at both of us, so we retreat to our workbenches and strategize for the season opener for trout in the Cascades or his first walleye tournament in the spring.

I walk down to the end of the dock and climb into the boat. After checking the engine oil and leaning over the transom to fit the drain plug, I press the button on the electric motor that my grandfather installed after old age kept him from lowering the lift manually. Thinking of who used the boat last, I don't want to lower it all the way until I start the engine, a replacement for a predecessor ruined when one uncle forgot to feed it oil. I turn the key. The engine coughs but doesn't catch. I pull the choke. I have to try five times before it fires, spits a cloud of blue smoke, then warms and evens out. I have maintenance to do before the week is through.

I put the engine in reverse and swing the boat onto Woman Lake. It's clear, pink sky layered over the opposite shoreline. Fog rests on the surface of Hunters Bay, the water like glass in the open patches. There is no wind. Beautiful, but bad for fishing.

I ease the throttle until the boat leaps on plane and I point the bow towards Horseshoe Island. Shooting between the edge of Horseshoe and the long reach of Government Point, I take the long way around, passing markers warning of shallow rock piles where walleye congregate if the wind is blowing from the east. I turn, venturing into the widest section of the lake. I ignore the GPS unit mounted on the dashboard, a topographical map of the lake bottom drawn in shades of blue on its screen.

I see the mouth of Lantern Bay where there's a fishing spot called Rosie's Drop, named for the woman's dock marking where weeded shoreline met deep water. My granddad and my father took me there before I could fish alone, teaching me how to use slip bobbers to catch walleye and northern pike moving into the bulrush to ambush baitfish. For the weight that fishing holds in our lives, those times we fished together were actually few.

When I was 15, I arrived in Des Moines and my grandfather was disappointed that I still had a mohawk, defying his stern demands to shave it off. Later that week, he donated my great-grandfather's service pistol from the first World War to a museum, citing my reluctance to "grow up" as proof I wasn't worthy to inherit the M191. This was a side of my grandfather well-known to my family and me. We didn't see him as the teenager who, during a string of floods one spring, convinced his friends to help him steal a slot machine from the partially submerged Urbandale Country Club and got caught trying to maneuver it into the back of my great-grandfather's car. Instead, we knew the rigor he adopted from the military academy he was sent to (and nearly expelled from several times) instead of jail, and the ten years in the Navy it took to, as he put it, 'straighten him out.'

Still, there was a softer side to my grandfather, one that I found reflected in the weekly letters he sent me when I was in Montana with my mother. His letters, scribbled on the yellow legal pad he kept on his desk, always started with an update on the weather—*try and send some rain our way, even though I know you guys don't have much to spare*. If it was fall, he'd tell me about the trip to the cabin he took with his friends, if

the fish were biting out by Bear Island or off of Battle Point—*one of these years, when you don't have school, you need to come on one of these fall trips with me and the fellas.* Sometimes, I'd get the weekly gossip from the model airfield where he spent his Sunday afternoons—*Bob put his new P-51 in the corn today. I told him it was too much airplane for him.*

When I'd visit Iowa, my grandfather would prod me for letting his letters go unanswered.

“But, I called you,” I said.

“There's something in writing a letter you can't get from other things,” he responded.

I didn't understand, then, how weekly weather updates could accomplish more in print than over the phone. But, I was still getting to know my grandfather, our time together reduced to my staccato visits to the Midwest, and I was still navigating our stunted boundaries.

When I was 16, I tested his trust when I was allowed to use his boat for the first time alone. I was scouting spots, expecting to take my older sister and her new boyfriend fishing after they arrived at the cabin. The desperation from a week without many bites convinced me to steal one of the vintage Rapalas my grandfather displayed above the fireplace. I chose a slender arc of carved balsa, three inches long, hand painted blue and silver to look like a minnow and dressed with treble hooks. That evening, anchored along the bulrush, I missed a few strikes before I heaved an eight pound northern pike to the side of the boat. It flailed for a moment before it met my net and calmed, gills flaring. The pike was a missile of an ambush predator; a body honed into a strip of hazel muscle

that hurled its spade mouth of sickle sharp teeth towards baitfish, smaller pike, or a last duckling straggling behind its mother.

Horrified, I realized the pike swallowed the Rapala. I would've killed the fish, but it seemed like a waste. I dug into its mouth and fumbled, my pliers falling in the water.

I feared my grandfather's anger more than teeth, so I propped the pike's jaw open with the butt of a screwdriver in my left hand and reached into his throat with my right. I kept my hand from grazing the gills or the walls of the fish's throat, knowing that any contact could trigger a tirade. I snapped the hook from cartilage but, as I was pulling one hand out, the other slipped. The pike slammed his jaws and rolled like an alligator, slicing a few of my knuckles nearly to bone. When it spit out my hand, the Rapala followed, tumbling onto the carpet.

Fingers dripping blood, I lowered the pike into the water, cradling it until the fog of shock cleared and it darted into the deep. I cut a strip from my shirt and wrapped the bitten hand, then pulled anchor and headed for the cabin.

The sun was set and the scrap of shirt around my fist soaked through with blood as I put the boat into the lift. I walked up the path to meet my father and my grandfather sitting on the porch. I told them about the northern, omitting what I had used to catch it. My sister heard and came out from the cabin, her boyfriend, Chet, trailing behind.

Chet was a corporate real estate agent in Orange County, California, complete with a greased slick of black hair, orange skin, and tapered slacks. I grinned and stuck out my hand. He winced, maybe because of the blood, the pungent smell of the pike's slime, or even my torn shirt, and didn't shake it.

“Joe,” my sister said, “This is J.P. I was just telling him you might take us out tomorrow night. He’s never fished before.”

“I hope you have decent health insurance,” my dad said.

“Yeah, if a northern can do that to him,” my grandfather gestured toward me, “what could it do to someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing?”

That night, JP marveled from the porch at the deer bedding down beyond the tree line. He had never seen a deer without narration by David Attenborough, or a fish that wasn’t behind a pane of aquarium glass or a butcher’s counter. We drank whiskey and my grandfather flicked the ice cubes in his glass of scotch with his ring finger. Chet rambled about his distant uncle, a deer hunter, and looked at us, longing for some respect. My grandfather and my father used to deer hunt, but by the time I was old enough, they only hunted birds. They were silent. I shrugged.

“I just fish,” I said, sipping bourbon and leaving Chet stranded. Ignorance was excusable, everyone has to learn, but pandering was just annoying.

I waited until after midnight to sneak the Rapala back to the mantle, my grandfather snoring from the twin bed perched in a corner of the living room. Later that week, I gave Chet a chance and took him fishing. He didn’t listen. He was impatient and overconfident and nearly hooked himself more than any fish. He didn’t last long before popping the line that held him to our family.

A few years later, celebrating Christmas, we were sitting around the dinner table. My grandfather announced to the family that, even though he couldn’t make it to his office as much, he was ‘doing his part not to let the Democrats drive this country into the shitter’ during the upcoming election. As a liberal long sniffed out by this part of my

family many years before, I cringed, locking eyes with one of my uncles as our fingers twitched over our ideological holsters, ready to draw and start firing at the first word.

Then, my grandfather lapsed further into one of his digressions, caused by the unknown tumor behind his eye. Thunder gathered on his brow as he ranted. The Veterans Administration were cheating him. They wouldn't let him stockpile his medications, even after he insisted that the Iranian government had been secretly investing in the U.S. power grid and they were going to pull the plug, leaving him without his diuretics. My father sighed and rubbed his eyes. Even the right-winged uncle who hoarded silver in his basement and found Glenn Beck sensible fell silent, forking scalloped potatoes around his plate with the focus of a brain surgeon. I diverted, asking my grandfather if he remembered the pike that bit back.

"I knew you stole my Rapala that night," he said. He looked at me, and I didn't know it then, but it would be one of the last times I'd see the clouds clear, leaving his eyes bright and sharp. "There were tooth marks all over it. At least you finally put it to some good use." He grinned, looking at me. Nervous laughter fluttered around the table. My family unfroze, reached for their wine glasses. We looked at each other and saw the other honestly—no pandering, no politics, no tumors, no bullshit. I was his grandson and he was my grandfather. He broke and bellowed with laughter.

I stop the boat just shy of the flats, a plateau of shallow water the size of a football field in the middle of the lake. In an evening of luck a few years prior, I unlocked a secret about the fish who feed here at night and my father and I have been perfecting our approach ever since.

I troll away the morning there, but my rod stays straight. I give a final pass, skirting the outside of Horseshoe's round middle. My grandfather, a proud Navy man who never actually did much sailing, once overestimated his skills and flipped a sailboat here, burying the mast in the mud and keeping his youngest son above the waterline until my teenage father rescued them in his fishing boat. This is also the spot where my father overestimated his time before a tornado touched down on the lake and he had to beach the boat on Horseshoe, riding out the storm with a few of his friends from a nearby town. These were stories I asked both of them to tell me as a child, when I couldn't sleep or storms kept us from the lake.

It is warm and I strip to my white t-shirt. I stare at the horizon. What was a clear morning has passed into a windy afternoon. There is a billowing wall of dark cumulus rolling over Rosie's Drop on the southern shoreline. I give up trolling. It is fall and the days are growing shorter, but it isn't cold enough for them to brave the sun for the shallows in the middle of the day. The fish have more time to feed at night, moonlight be damned. They are deeper.

I move to the edge of the flats where I know a weed bed grows on the slope towards cooler water, grabbing my Lindy rig and baiting a shiner minnow. My grandfather would be proud. A few years ago, my father and I bought him a set of trolling rods. He hasn't touched them, insisting that he could out fish our modern tactics with his classic Lindy rig or jig. I pause to read the northwest wind. This is storm wind, but it works up a good drift.

I let out my line, the Lindy weight sinking to the bottom. I keep my finger on the line, bail open, lifting and setting. Halfway down the slope, I feel a sharp hit and let the

line go. I pull the rod tip up, watching loose monofilament coil on the surface tension of the water before it's sucked below. I count to 10 and flip the bail, waiting for the line to grow taut. Just when the tip starts to bend, I rear back, setting the hook. The fish shakes its head twice and heaves towards bottom, pulling line from my reel in a steady whine. I feel the electric buzz of adrenaline and tighten the drag with a flick of my thumb. I play it light, letting it lead the way. When it turns, I turn, shifting the rod from side to side to keep the hook set. Head down, it doesn't buck and hitch. It feels like a walleye. I get it close to the surface twice and, each time, it runs for bottom. This is where I could lose it, where it could run and pop the hook and leave me stunned and wondering what it was. On the third try, the walleye breaks the surface, swollen green and white, fattening up for winter. Floating lazily on her side next to the boat, she is over twenty inches. I release the hook with my hand and let her go. We'll fill our live wells and freezer bags later in the week.

I rock for a moment with the boat in the waves, smiling. I caught my first 'all-on-my-own' walleye in this spot, over a decade before. I was fishing for perch in a deep cabbage bed and when my bobber shot beneath the water, I set the hook on something that felt like a brick. After I managed to get the walleye to the boat, I fumbled reaching for my net, giving the fish time to thrash and spit the bait. I didn't care. I stood, nearly tipping the rowboat as I stared into the water, unable to believe that I had reached across that murky barrier and pulled the fish I had been raised to find. In the years since, that feeling has never waned.

In two more passes, two fish of similar size follow. The clouds threaten, rolling closer. Thunder rumbles, but I keep fishing. I am right where my grandfather would want

me to be. I wonder if he is still spread over an operating table one state away. My father hasn't called. I know I should head back, check in, but I don't because it is better to be here, away from bad news. I convince myself to take one more pass, trying to steal my mind from push and pull of daily life like I normally can while I'm on the lake. The thunder gets louder. Just one more pass.

When the boat dives over lapping whitecaps and controlling my drift becomes impossible, I reel up my line and ditch the minnow. The thunder is loud now, no longer a growl but a series of sharp cracks. A bolt of lightning flashes and I count two seconds before the crash. It is past time to leave. I crank the engine, but it coughs and dies. I try again, watching sheets of rain bury Hunters Bay, where the cabin is. The engine spits and catches, then I clip the cord leading to the motor's dead man switch onto my belt loop.

I have a moment before the storm and I collide, so I push the engine and the boat leaps, slamming against the waves. My boat is 18 feet long, but the waves toss the Lund like a bath toy. The engine whines and the propeller froths and barks as it breaks the surface. I am trying to move with it, but I can't keep up and slam into the seat. My back aches. I meet the storm.

Horseshoe Island disappears behind rain. I have to turn into the wind and I slow the engine. If I launch from a wave facing into the wind at full speed, the boat might flip. Lightning strikes the far end of Hunter's Bay and there is no time to count before the thunder. I see only rain and whitecaps. The windshield is useless. Rain slashes at my eyes and I can't see the GPS. I trust my heading, fighting the boat over each wave. A horn of Horseshoe appears in front of me and I slam the throttle back. Water spills over the

transom. Panting, I think about beaching the boat, taking cover in the woods, but I am close.

Easing the throttle, I pass rock piles shallow enough to rip the motor from the boat. The waves grow. More lightning, but my shoreline swells black and solid from behind the rain. White caps slam over docks with a rabid froth. I am disoriented, my usual stars or landmarks clouded. I troll the shoreline, squinting through stinging rain until, finally, our dock light flashes through the storm twice, my father at the switch.

I miss the lift once, slamming the boat into reverse, water burying the stern until I turn and give the boat gas, pushing water towards the back. I line up again and land it. The waves throw the boat against the bumpers of the lift cradle as I leap towards the crank and the dead man's switch kills the motor. I push the lift button, using my whole weight to keep the boat centered until it rises. Leaning over the transom, water sprays my face as I struggle to remove the drain plug.

I jog up the dock, drain plug in hand. Downed tree limbs scatter the hill. My father is standing on the porch.

“Get a little wet?” he asks, chuckling. “I figured you’d hunkered down.”

“Any word?”

He nods.

“Why didn’t you call?”

“I wanted to let you fish. I didn’t want to ruin it.”

“How bad?”

“Maybe two months.”

We pause for a moment. All around us, thunder and lightning and wind and rain.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Yeah.” He sighs. “I am too. You do any good?”

“Yeah. I did alright.”

“Good,” he says, and waves me into the warm cabin. “You’ll have something to tell your grandfather when he calls.”

I follow my dad into the cabin, where a fire crackles behind the stone hearth. The vintage Rapala hangs on the pine mantle, an arc of divots in the silver and blue paint. I ask him to tell me about the time that Senior flipped the sailboat. He pours some whiskey as the storm rages. We sit, and I flick the ice cubes in my glass.

We do not know that Senior will die that spring or that Pudd will follow four days later. We don’t know that he will ask for half of his ashes to be spread at Woman Lake, or that I will find a binder full of his letters that I kept and read all about the weather long after his last voicemail is gone from my phone. We don’t know that we will bury the other half of him on a Sunday and, on Monday, we will load our tackle in the boat and leave before the sun rises, finding water just as the folds of pink and gold blossom across the sky and the loons cry their long howl that sounds so desperate. We will cry with them in the way we know.