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Hope Chest: A Memoir of Home, Marriage, and Objects

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HOPE CHEST
A Memoir of Home, Marriage, and Objects

By

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DEDICATION

For Sylvia, Cindy, and Michael, my past, present, and future.

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ABSTRACT

As a child, Emilie often imagined what her future home would look like. As she wandered through flea markets with her mother, she would envision the pieces she found there in a home of her own, building spacious libraries, comfortable bedrooms, and well-appointed kitchens in her imagination with the same passion that other children built models out of Legos. Although the houses always changed, there was an underlying certainty that she would eventually have one house—a certainty that could not be realized once she got married, and committed to living wherever the Army stationed her husband. In this memoir, Emilie pieces together the first three years of her marriage, what it means to be married yet still fiercely independent, and the ways in which home can be created when the home you know is all too far away. By exploring the objects that she would choose to keep no matter where they move, Emilie also reveals what it means to live at the beck and call of the Army, and the ways in which building a home mirrors the work it takes to build a life for oneself.

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PROLOGUE: DOORS

I was seven the first time I noticed the door in my grandmother's living room, and wondered where it went. It was a cold Christmas day, though it hadn't snowed, and we had finished our dinner over a large table my Uncle Lee had built. Uncle Lee has a habit of taking on big projects and making them bigger, which is why my grandmother MeeMee's table can seat more than ten if necessary and our Christmas dinner always rivals Thanksgiving, with the appearance of both a turkey and a ham unless MeeMee manages to talk him out of it. Normally after a large meal, you can find all of us lingering over the table, taking advantage of the seating and its proximity to a small den with a large television. Christmas, however, is an occasion that justifies moving into the far more formal living room, which could still be described as a parlor in an age when parlors have gone out of fashion. To get there we had to traipse through MeeMee's bedroom, a room which had originally served some other purpose, though I didn't know that then. As soon as we walked past her bed with the coats piled up on it high, and her large dresser with a mirror over the top, we could see the living room where our presents waited.

The room glowed softly in the late winter gray that came through the windows, though MeeMee had the curtains pulled close and towels stuck under the door frames to ward off draughts. Although she had the heat turned up, there was still a chill in the air near the windows, as though they were trying to draw us all closer together. Walking into the living room always made me feel like I was walking into a picture from my mother's childhood. From the few snapshots I had seen, the living room hadn't changed very much over time, though a few pieces had been added and moved around over the years. The tree stood at the end of the room, adorned with brightly colored Christmas lights in every hue, winking and blinking with a determined cheeriness. It was decorated with ornaments that my mother had sewn herself, similar to those on my own Christmas tree at home, and a few ornaments from her childhood though they changed every year depending on what MeeMee did and didn't want to pull out. The rest of the room was lit by a few sturdy brass lamps with sculptural drum shades, and an old brass chandelier, its patina worn to a handsome greenish-brown. Its colors were echoed by the deep green tiles that outlined the fireplace, my favorite part of the room. China hutches stood in corners where they couldn't get knocked around easily by small children. They housed MeeMee's milk glass and crystal collections during the winter, when they were no longer needed to hold the roses she grew in her garden. I loved to look at them, though

I didn't dare try to open the case. Overhead, wooden giraffes in different sizes kept watch; their tower grew each year as MeeMee received more renditions of her favorite animal, some from students and some from family.

My mother's old upright piano still sat in the back corner of the room, almost obscured by the size of this year's tree, though I could still see enough of the keys that my fingers itched to pick out a non-existent tune. Had I been able to read music, I would have had plenty of choices; my mother's old sheet music was still stored under the bench. I loved to take the old music books and piano lessons out, lifting the wooden bench top carefully to avoid smashed fingers, asking my mother which songs had been her favorites. She would hold the sheet music longingly and would smile for a moment, before claiming that she had never really been very good. Despite her protestations, I always believed otherwise—she had practiced, taken lessons, and was even asked to play the organ at church on Sundays. If you listen to her version of the story, you'd think that they asked her to play because they couldn't get anyone better to come all the way out to Springfield, that they were stuck with her occasional sharp notes whether they liked it or not. I always believed that they loved her music because they loved her, and because they could tell that she loved what she was playing—even if it wasn't perfect.

Although there were several large packages under the tree, their metallic wrapped surfaces beckoning under the twinkle lights, we all waited to begin with the Christmas stockings that my mother handed out one by one. They were made of quilted fabric, some green, some red, and some in a winter floral pattern, each one a little bit different, because other than the original set of five they had been made as the family grew bigger through marriage and grandchildren. Mom made the first batch while she was still living on her own in her apartment in Nashville. It was the first home she ever had all to herself, without two brothers and a sister to share bathrooms and bedtimes, or a roommate to muss her things. It was a small apartment, and when she describes it, she always begins by saying that it was "teeny, teeny," though it had all of the basics: a living room, a bathroom barely big enough to walk around in, a galley kitchen with everything shoved against the walls, and a bedroom that was only a few steps away. Initially, her living room also featured a television, one that MeeMee brought her from the farm, but it died shortly thereafter, leaving her with time to fill in the evenings until she could earn enough money to buy a new one. She started the stockings as a secret project that year, hoping to make a better Christmas for everyone than the year before, the first year after her dad died.

After a death, Mom always waits to send her letters of condolence, preferring to be the voice that appears after everyone else has assumed you should pick up and move on with your life. After the casseroles and looks of concern stop pouring in, families are usually left with grief and a pile of dishes that need to be returned to their owners. In that first year after her dad's death, everything was painful, and they particularly dreaded Christmas. Her father always made it a special occasion. By all accounts, he dearly loved to have a good time though he took his work on the farm seriously. They made it through that first Christmas by spending it elsewhere—Mrs. Betty Dean, a neighbor and friend, invited them to a large breakfast with her brood, assuring them that they would fit right in. Mom remembers it as bedlam, with more people and food than they ever could have imagined. They came home that night exhausted, thankful, and still filled with something far from the Christmas spirit. Not wanting to repeat the activities from the previous year, Mom decided that she would create a new tradition—something that wouldn't remind them of her father's absence more than Christmas. She sewed each stocking carefully with her machine, using lace trimming to embellish the top, where she cross-stitched each person's name and an illustration. I'm not sure where she got the money to fill them with presents that first year, but it's a practice she continued. I loved to trace the letters that spelled out my name on my stocking after I learned to write

them in school, and secretly thought the doll that decorated it was the prettiest embellishment of all.

Stockings in hand, we all adjourned to open the presents my mom had wrapped the night before, long after I had fallen asleep. The grown-ups sat on the available furniture in the room, a clawfoot settee upholstered in a light floral pattern, with deep cushions and a tufted back, a large rocking chair, and a few sturdy looking arm chairs that looked as though they were meant for fireside conversations. We had grown to the point where there were more people than chairs, so the remaining adults brought chairs from the kitchen to fill in the gaps. My cousins and I clustered together on the green-gold carpet, which was surely the height of fashion in another era, careful to leave enough space that questions of ownership wouldn't arise once the wrapping paper and labels were ripped off of the presents. As we opened our gifts, we stopped occasionally to exclaim over a particularly wonderful surprise, or to scratch our knees and ankles, which suffered from the fuzzy nap of carpet fibers that made their way through even the sturdiest of socks and tights.

Once the presents were opened, we usually divided along generational lines. The grown-ups would return to the kitchen table, where they would play games of Rook and eat nachos until long after dark. My cousins and I usually stayed in the living room, taking advantage of the space it afforded as we played

with our new toys. Although they played in the middle of the room, where they didn't have to worry about furniture, I always preferred to sit behind the settee, closer to MeeMee's bedroom and the kitchen. From there, I could still play to my heart's content, but I could also keep an ear out for any stories that the grown-ups might tell. At seven, I had already figured out that grown-ups tell the best stories when they aren't worried about what little ears might hear. I loved to hear about my Dad's first day of school, when he left the schoolyard at recess and went for a soda at the corner store, because he wasn't having any fun with his new teacher. Mom never wanted us to hear that one while we were school-aged, afraid it might encourage us to have similar notions. Uncle Lee told stories in a big booming voice, modifying from his usual pitch to do any other voices that might have dialogue. Although I sometimes had to listen through the death talk that occurred at the table, when they would recount the family history of someone who had died recently, I always found that someone's death meant stories—whether or not they had been a "Coopertown girl," a Castleman, or a friend of Connie's sister's boy. They spoke about people I had never met, used names I had never heard, but over time I began to connect them all in my head as a part of a thin web.

As I played and listened behind the settee, I felt a draft. I looked up, startled by its presence, since I was sitting so close to the large heating vent at the

back of the room. Like my grandmother and mother, I had an affinity for being close to vents—they warmed my body quickly, and if I stood on top of them, the hot air would cause the skirt of my dress to billow and swell. That particular vent, however, was a little frightening since it was almost the same height as my body. The grates on it were a little too wide, and it seemed like it would be very easy to lose something valuable in their depths. When I looked up, however, I no longer saw the wall I always assumed was present in that corner of the living room. Instead, I saw dark wooden panels that met the green-gold carpet and soared upward, their solid surface only interrupted by the presence of a dark bronzed door knob. I crawled over to it on my hands and knees, not wanting to draw attention to myself. I didn't know if anyone else had seen the door arrive when I did, if they'd noticed that it had grown, like magic. I ran my fingers under the gap between the carpet and the underside of the door, moving my small fingers as nonchalantly as possible in the event that anyone passed by. It felt cold, and I couldn't hear a sound behind it.

* * *

After I found that first door, I started looking around the house, wondering if there were any other doors I might have missed. These rooms, which I had known all my life, were suddenly a source of mystery and MeeMee's house became a place where anything could happen. On that first night, I looked

around the rest of the living room and noticed another door on the same wall as the first. In earlier years, I must have imagined that they were merely an accent to the fireplace, meant to draw attention to its presence. Now I knew otherwise. In the smaller den off the kitchen, I suddenly became suspicious of the cellar door, and the door I had always been told led to a closet. I wondered if they really led somewhere else. When we left, as I turned my head I saw another door, leading from the back porch to somewhere further inside the house. On the road back to Nashville, I realized for the first time that MeeMee's house went up higher on the outside than I had ever seen on the inside. I didn't know where those doors led, but I knew that there were stairs behind at least one of them.

Once I was back at my own house, safely ensconced in the routine of school, homework, and occasional trips to Springfield on the weekend, I still found myself wondering about those doors. If I walked up to one at the right time and put my hand in the middle of the door, maybe it would open, and I would be able to go through it, like Princess Irene in *The Princess and the Goblin*. Irene hadn't known there were secret doors in her house either until one day they suddenly appeared. When she went through, she found her great-great-grandmother waiting for her, spinning a magic thread on a spinning wheel in a room filled with roses. I imagined myself as such a princess, walking through hallways that my grandmother's house wasn't big enough to hold, until I came

to a chamber at the top of the house. Though I always imagined many stairs and several halls, the chamber at the top was subject to change. Sometimes I met a magical great-great ancestor, just like Irene, and she would tell me stories about the past. Other times, I imagined rooms filled with dresses and books and secrets, waiting for me to find and revel in them. I did not limit my fancies to the realistic—to do so would have squandered them. Instead, I built several hundred rooms in my head, each more interesting than the last. After all, I had several doors to work with, and one of them was bound to lead to something fascinating. Every time I saw them, it was as though they kept trying to open themselves for me, trying to let me in.

By the time I was ten, however, my fantasies no longer satisfied me. The doors were a mystery, but they were a tangible one. I just had to steel my nerves, grasp the door knob, and turn it at the right moment so that no one would notice. I had already figured out that the cellar was just a cellar, fascinating though it might be with its jars of preserves and canned goods, and the closet really was just a closet. But something was stopping me—there seemed to be an unspoken rule about such things. You don't enter doors that you haven't been invited to open, you don't poke your nose into someone's private spaces. Even though parts of me felt like they belonged to that house, I knew that it wasn't my home, that these doors weren't mine to open as I pleased. In truth, I was more of an

imaginary explorer than a real one. My voyages and missions started and ended in my head, though I did playact many of them in my room in full costume. As a real girl, however, I was much better at being a thinker, an observer, and a listener. So I listened, and I waited, until I found just the right pause in a conversation with my mother, when I asked her why there were doors in MeeMee's house that we never opened. She got a faraway look in her eyes, almost like the one she used to get when I asked her about the piano, but sadder. "Those doors go to places that are too hard to keep open. They go to rooms that used to have a different life in the past, when Dad was alive. They just have too many memories for MeeMee to keep open all the time. If they needed the space it would be different, but they just don't—not anymore."

* * *

Although I had loved the idea of doors that contained endless possibilities, the thought that these doors somehow contained a link to my past, to my mother and grandmother's past, made them all the more fascinating. Instead of imagining less about what might lie behind them, I started imagining more, wondering what the house had been like when it was a part of a farm that my family tended, rather than a house that sat in the midst of acreage that MeeMee rented out. From the front, it looked like a simple white frame craftsman farmhouse, set back a ways from the road and hugged by tall trees on

either sided. Its gravel driveway curved around the front, meeting the paved sidewalk that led up the stairs to a heavy wooden front door, and then curved again, past the peony and snowball bushes to the back door. Its foundation was covered in the same limestone that lined the interstate as we made the drive from Nashville to Springfield, a common feature for older buildings in middle Tennessee. None of the windows were adorned with shutters, though a dormer winked out from the second floor.

The porch looked across to the fields, and from there we marked every season. Summer meant fields filled with sweet corn, soybeans, and green tobacco leaves, with wheat harvested by Father's Day. In the fall, cornstalks would fade from green to sun-bleached yellow, rattling when the wind got up. We would watch smoke rise in thin wisps from barn roof-tops over the hills, carrying the spicy scent of curing tobacco down the road. By winter, we could see to the bones—the hills were stark fields separated by slender tree lines deprived of their modesty once the leaves fell. The openness of the air made it feel that much colder as we hurried inside, waiting for buds to knot on the fruit trees in the orchard, a sign of spring. Before my time, however, the porch was meant for more than watching and waiting. It was also a place where work would happen, as people sat in the shade shelling peas, silking corn, and hoping for a breeze.

MeeMee came to the house for the first time as my grandfather's girlfriend, though she had probably passed it more than once driving from her parents' house on the way to town. It was not a grand house by any means, though it had been added to over the generations as more children arrived and needs expanded—my grandfather was the youngest child in a family of ten, though not all of them lived in the house at the same time. Like MeeMee's family, they believed that many hands make for lighter work, and there was plenty of work to be had out in the fields. She arrived on my grandfather's arm to help him prepare Sunday dinner, though his parents would not be in attendance. They were going to one of his sister's for their noon meal. As she cooked with her future husband in the kitchen for the first time—him taking care of the meat, her making a cabbage apple slaw—she watched the leaves fall from the window, never dreaming that she would live in that house for the rest of her life. She came back to the house as a young bride, sharing it with her husband and his elderly parents. They didn't have enough money for a farm of their own, so they built a future in the same house that my grandfather was born in. Although I've always thought of it being MeeMee's house, a home that she chose and loved, I think it's really been more of a house that she fell into with pockets that she loved, like her nest in the kitchen.

When I imagined it as it once was, I pulled bits and pieces of my mother's childhood stories together. The large bushes that lined the left side of the house grew smaller as I remembered that they used to try to see how far they could jump over it from the top of the porch. The grain silos, which now sit rusted and empty, are filled and ready to meet the demands of milk cows. Despite this, my mother will still bottle feed as many of the little ones as she can. Behind the back porch, which is still fully framed in, the chicken house is home to a testy brood, who lay eggs as it pleases them and peck my mother's hands when she tries to collect their bounty. Its boards are no longer silvery gray, the rose beds that I love are just an idea simmering in the back of MeeMee's head, and the clematis vines that I look at with wonder may still be there, though I am not sure. The baby chick house is a home for wee chicks once more, no longer a place to store lawn equipment and other odds and ends. The barns near the orchard are new and well-kept, as Fred Borthick wouldn't accept anything less than pristine order on his property. His truck sits in the drive, and he passes their new mustard colored RV as he makes his way home, dreaming of the trip that they will someday take out west, making stops along the way until they reach the redwoods in California.

My mother, both a child and not a child, appears and disappears, re-emerging in freeze frames that I remember from stories and snapshots. Gone is

the mother I know, with the dark permed hair, thick glasses, and assuring promises that everything will be alright. In her place stands a girl with the same wide smile, but with browned arms and knees and a dress her mother made. Out back she holds her head close to a kitten, rubbing noses after dressing it in doll's clothes. When the rain falls, she looks up at her father and asks if it's a good rain, or a bad one. In her grandmother's bedroom, she looks at the radio, but dares not touch it—grandmother has told her if she does the boogey man will come and take her away. She wonders if the boogey man knows the gypsies who will come and take her away if she goes too far out on her own. She has her own room upstairs, it's always been the "girls' room," though unlike her aunts she hasn't had to share it yet. The "boys' room" across the hall houses her brothers, who are clad in overalls and always up to something. I imagine her little bed, a shelf or two for her books, and the white frame baby doll bed that now sits in my parents' house. The baby in it has her own little white closet, and clothes made from fabric scraps. When the sun comes in it gets too hot, so she cracks a window for some relief, which won't come until air conditioning is a part of every house in the southeast. Inside the kitchen, she feels as though they have cooked all day, moving from one meal and dishwashing session to the next. Her brother says a clean kitchen is the saddest thing of all, because it means there isn't anything good to eat in the oven. The best surprise is when her father

comes in with gallons of ice cream he picked up from town, always bearing banana, his favorite flavor.

These places and people seem so familiar to me that I'm almost surprised when we go back to the farm and it's as I remember it, rather than how I imagined it. When we drive in we pass the boat my grandfather owned, the one he was pulling out of the lake when he had his heart attack. He'd had scarlet fever as a child, and his heart never fully recovered, though he probably wouldn't have ever admitted it. I've passed this boat for almost as long as I can remember, and yet I feel as though I can count on two hands the details I know about the grandfather I never had the chance to meet. It's almost covered by vines now, but I can see its nose peering out of the barn as though it's waiting for a chance to go back out on the water.

* * *

I was twelve the first time I saw where the doors led to, and what MeeMee's house looked like with fewer secrets. That year, my aunt decided to move to China to teach English, which meant that everything in her house suddenly had to find a new home. My mother agreed to take in several boxes of books and they made their way around our house—some on bookshelves downstairs, others in my room where I hoped they would remain for the duration. For the most part, however, my aunt's possessions ended up where

many of them had started out, back at MeeMee's house. When my sister and I walked into the parlor, which had been left open so that she could pack, the doors were all flung open, exhaling dust and stale air, inviting us in.

The door to the left of the fireplace did not lead up a set of winding stairs as my seven-year-old self had imagined, and I did not hear the call of a long lost ancestor from its depths. Had I heard such a cry, I probably would have fainted on the spot despite the summer heat. Instead, I remained upright, and found that it concealed a long hallway, its floor covered with burnt-orange outdoor carpeting in an attempt to keep the hardwood free of scuffs. My sister and I stood frozen in the doorway, prevented from moving any further by our own doubts. Were these open doors an invitation to anyone, or did we dare go any further? Even though there weren't any grown-ups in the house to keep us from exploring, who knew what other doors they had access to? As we waited for our courage to mount, we walked to the other door in the parlor and peered inside, wondering if there was yet another mystery hall waiting for us to make its acquaintance.

The second door did not lead to another hallway, which we probably could have guessed had we paid more attention to the exterior shape of the house. Instead, we found a room about the size of our own bedrooms at home, an apt comparison as it had been our great-grandmother's bedroom and sitting

room until her death. In her time, the room contained a big bed, a radio that no one should touch, a dressing table with a mirror that she used every morning, and several upholstered chairs—some for sitting, and one to hold stacks of *Arizona Highways* magazines that her sister sent her. Although the walls are a nondescript beige now, they used to be a rich purple-gray that set off her striking clock on the mantle. For my mother, Grandmother Borthick's room was a treasure trove filled with pretty things that she wasn't supposed to touch. Like any child, she touched them anyway. She picked up hatpins, rearranged bottles of medicine, and wrapped herself up in the soft, translucent white curtains that reminded her of crinolines. She stood on top of a covered box beneath the window in a curtain-dress as though clad for a ball, and sang to an imaginary audience until Grandmother Borthick hustled her out.

In the years since her passing, however, the room changed to suit a new set of needs. By the time I passed through its door, it held a large pool table with a dark green felt top covered in a heavy layer of dust. There were still pool balls on the table and in the pockets, though I had no idea the last time someone played a game. I ran my hands along the yellow-brown fringe that decorated the pockets, watching them dance, before picking up some of the balls and clinking them back into place. They were smooth and looked very old; their numbers were smaller than the ones I had seen on television. Cue sticks stood in straight,

orderly rows along the wall, and a colored glass light hung overhead. Records were stacked on top of one another in the corners of the room, waiting until someone decided to play them again. This was not a room that MeeMee would have picked out for herself; it had to be something that belonged to her husband, Fred. I remembered how much he used to love games of any kind, something I found out when Erin went through a game phase of her own. At six she carried around a joke book, telling them in the order they were listed to anyone who would stop and listen. After they tired of her jokes, she pulled out a deck of cards, challenging them to just one game. It was never just one game—she inherited her grandfather's savviness with a card deck, along with his desire to win.

Emboldened by what we had found, we walked through the other doorway and down the hall. We paused for a moment when we reached a staircase, knowing that this was probably the point of no return. If we heard any noises in the pool room, we could easily walk back into the parlor, pretending that we'd been there all along. If we went upstairs, there was no way we could make up an excuse for our presence there. After a moment of contemplation, we took a deep dusty breath, gripped the dark wooden railing, and began to climb the narrow, rust-carpeted stairs, trying hard not to trip on the stairs steep slope and small treads. The stairs ended in a sun-soaked landing, as did the rust

colored carpet, giving way to honey wood floors. The dormer windows looked out to the fields across the road, and I imagined what it must have been like for my mother when she finally got a bedroom up here. Until she was thirteen, she shared a room with her brothers—first the den area downstairs when they were all small, then the "boys' room" upstairs after they remodeled it. Money for the house was never a top priority as long as the space still functioned well enough; farm payments always had to come first.

The room that had once been my mother's still looked like a bedroom, more than likely because it had been one in the recent past—my aunt took over that room when my mother moved out on her own. The avocado green carpet could have been there during Mom's tenure, though the curtains and wall paper were additions when my aunt came along. My sister and I sorted through stacks of paperbacks, finding our aunt's name in a few, our mother's name in others. We looked at the bureau longingly, wondering what was inside, but it felt as though rifling through the drawers was just a bit too far. Instead, we contented ourselves with looking at the jewelry and trinkets scattered across the dressing table, the remaining clothes in the closet, and the dolls that lay in a small baby bed in the corner.

Aware that we might be prowling on a time clock, we shifted our attention to the "boys' room" after a few minutes, wondering what else we could

find in this unsanctioned visit upstairs. The "boys' room" was darker, lined with wood paneling and a harvest gold carpet just a shade off from the greenish-gold used in the parlor downstairs. Since no one had lived in the room since my uncles were younger, this bedroom had become a home for all kinds of things that no longer belonged to the day-to-day routine of life downstairs. The bureau drawers were filled with picture frames, clothes, and linens, some of them embroidered, others that were plain and still in good repair. I found jewelry boxes, the kind that you receive as gifts with something shiny inside, and wondered what they had originally held. In coming upstairs, I hadn't really known what I was looking for. Had someone asked, I probably would have said that I just wanted to know what was behind the doors. As I started looking through rooms, I couldn't help but look for signs of my mother, of the person she had been while she lived here. What I found was less of my mother and more of my MeeMee, the things she had chosen to keep but didn't want to keep around her. Though she hates the idea of being a packrat and loves a good clearing out, there were some things that she couldn't quite leave behind. We heard light footsteps on the stair treads, and MeeMee's silvery crown peered at us from the landing. "Come on back downstairs, now. Y'all don't need to be breathing in that dust. It's not good for you to be up there." She waited for us to clamber down the stairs, and firmly shut the door behind us.

* * *

As I have grown older, I've often thought back on the rooms upstairs, piecing them together with the pool room and the outbuildings on MeeMee's farm. I can count on one hand the times that I have returned to each of these spaces, though being welcome at her house has been one of the things I could always count on in my life. I spent summer evenings picking crabapples with my cousins, coming in with mosquito bites covering my legs as though I had been pelted with the fruit. I listened to the radio while we ate supper, knowing that we would be sent back with leftovers to carry us through the first part of the week. Although I didn't live there all of the time, her house felt like my home, a place where I belonged and had my bearings. I felt secure in the fact that I knew this place and its people, that I could claim them as mine. When I realized that I didn't know MeeMee's house as well as I thought I did, I also realized for the first time that perhaps I didn't know my grandmother quite as well as I thought I did. In that moment, she became more than just my grandmother—she became Sylvia, herself and fully human, someone who had an entire lifetime of experiences that existed before I knew her. I have been trying to recover these stories ever since, one phone call conversation and one visit at a time.

In getting to know my grandmother and learning her stories, I have also found myself trying to figure out my own story and where it is heading. When I

got married and made plans to live a life where home would not be settled for the next twenty years, I reclaimed my old childhood habit of looking at people's homes when I visited, partially out of curiosity and partially out of envy—they had time to stay in one place long enough to collect dust. In doing so, I have been reminded of the ways in which homes reflect their owners, what they love, what they choose to keep, what they would rather eliminate, and what they value. In MeeMee's house there are very few pictures. My mother once told me that pictures make her sad, that they bring her too close to a past that is gone; her house tells the story of someone who cannot slow down, who must keep moving forward. If someone comes through my house fifty years from now, they may be able to describe me to myself in ways that I never could imagine.

CHAPTER 1: SIDEBOARD

When I was young, I often wondered if God saw the world as a dollhouse, in which he could move the pieces and people as he saw fit. Lying awake at night, I would stare at the patterns that the street lamp made through the trees and the window blinds, imagining God in his study peering over the many homes in his care. Reaching through the stars, he would lift the roof edges quietly, separating dark brown shingles to prod someone along or comfort someone in need. I tried not to think too hard about what it meant that God could lift these roofs and bad things could still happen. When I envisioned these scenes, God's face was never clearly defined. The homes that he reached into, however, were always crafted with careful detail. These dollhouses weren't like the plastic Fisher Price model I played with at home, with its pastel palette and doorways made wider to accommodate more than one set of childish hands. Instead, the narrow doorways always opened to rooms filled with patterned wallpaper, wooden floors, and soft fringed rugs. I pictured beds with delicately turned legs, framed paintings, and flower-filled vases, wishing that I could reach out and touch them too.

Years later, looking at our new living room in Columbia, South Carolina, I couldn't help but wish that childhood me was right. I waited a moment, twisting my wedding ring with my thumb, hoping to see signs of a familiar hand that could peel back the roof and make this place a home. The large cardboard moving boxes multiplied while I waited—they breed when left unattended. Although I have lived in Columbia twice in my life so far, it has always felt like a place of transition rather than a place to call home. It is possible that my association with Columbia and transition is a natural byproduct of its role in my life: it is the place where I came for my undergraduate degree, the place where I met the man who would become my husband, and the place where I am now working toward an MFA degree in creative writing. Somehow, these life stages fraught with transition have become interwoven with the place itself. Columbia is never a place of rest, a refuge where roots can form. Instead, it is a place where nothing is certain, and everything is subject to change—including me.

Mike came down the stairs, his short brown hair damp after moving yet another round of professionally packed Army moving boxes upstairs and out of sight. The second floor of our new house was a cavernous master suite, ideally suited to hold the things that we didn't need to unpack right away. Visitors always asked why we hadn't taken that room for ourselves, but we knew better: at the end of the day, the slightly smaller master bedroom on the first floor

would always win because it did not entail a trip up the stairs. In the many months that we had lived apart as a married couple, I had never really imagined what our first shared home together would look like. At different stages of my life I had envisioned more than one house of dreams, adding rooms as my interests expanded. I turned down magazine corners to mark kitchens with large windows, ample countertops, and dark wood floors, and bookmarked home offices with built-in bookshelves. In my mind, I crafted rooms comfortable enough that people felt invited to stay, rather than wondering which seat would be least likely to cause offense. I wanted a house where we would create a life together, such that visitors would say the house had grown rather than being built. Our timeline and our future, however, did not privilege finding a deeply rooted house of dreams. Instead, we needed a lease that we could sign in ten days or less at the beginning of October, preferably one that fit within the Army Basic Housing Allowance guidelines.

As I sat on our couch and surveyed our new home, I saw room for potential. For the past two weeks, we had been living in the one-bedroom apartment I called home my first year of grad school—our first year of married life apart. Cooking dinner in the galley kitchen, we knocked elbows reaching for spices, murmured "Excuse me," as we reached for glasses, and one of us always seemed to be waiting as the other opened the refrigerator or the dishwasher;

there wasn't enough space to open both at the same time. We ate dinner on my aunt's loveseat, a welcome donation that first year when I did not have any furniture of my own that wasn't in a storage locker in Kansas during the six month deployment. In the year that I was alone, I would swing my legs up on the cushions, nestle my feet into its soft blue eighties woven upholstery, and eat dinner in the same spot I fell asleep, my textbooks and papers laid out on the coffee table. I laid my head on pillows that my MeeMee had made, appliqued with sunbonnet girls—one pink and one green. I traced the outline of their form, running my finger along their bonneted profiles, lingering on the single button that decorated the pink hat and the lace on the green. They reminded me of countless pillowcases, nightgowns, and blankets that she'd made as long as I could remember. The small living room and its adjoining dining area were a womb at night, their corners softened by lamplight and the glow of my television. I needed the voices then, to remind me that everything would be okay.

In the nine months since Mike had been back from Iraq, he had been to the apartment only a handful of times, though we had to put his name on the lease so that I could get the apartment at all. Each time he came, he struggled to find a place to sit, choosing the arm chair and ottoman more often than not because it felt like the only place where he wasn't in the way. On his rare four

day visits I promised to be home soon, pausing for a quick kiss as I hurried out the door to class. When I came home, we ate dinner side by side on a loveseat that felt more suited to one. The dining room table had ceased to function as a surface for eating long ago, claimed by papers and books that needed re-shelving. It wasn't so different from the times that I had visited him in Kansas and Oklahoma, or the week that he had visited my apartment in Germany. As always, we were thankful for any time we could have together. And yet, the room looked smaller with him in it; the bathroom seemed darker, though my mother had changed out the light bulbs, and I noticed for the first time that everything in the apartment was mine. I remembered feeling as though I was visiting whenever I went to his apartments, surrounded by uniforms, closets filled with tactical gear, and furniture that was ours only in the sense that they had been purchased with soon-to-be joint finances. Though I would cry once it was empty, mourning the loss of something I couldn't even articulate, I knew it was time to leave. As I looked at his duffel bag in the bedroom, I wondered when it would feel like we were really married—when we would stop feeling like one of us was just visiting.

So far, the feeling hadn't passed yet, even though the house was new to both of us, placing us on even domestic footing for the first time in our lives. Unlike my former apartment, this house had rooms, hallways, and its own

washer and dryer, a housewarming gift from my parents. To me, being a grown up meant not having to schlep clean clothes anywhere that they might come in contact with the elements. As an added bonus, unlike Mike's former apartment, the air was clean and the walls were not steeped in years of cigarette smoke. We were lucky. Our shared furniture had arrived mostly unscathed; a veritable miracle when it comes to an Army move, though many pieces still bore a yellow Army moving sticker that would likely never come off. Over the years we would probably collect a number of them, as long as the furniture held up well enough to make one more move. There was room to grow. Lots, and lots of room to grow—beige walls that begged for picture frames, a dining niche that could house a farm table by Thanksgiving, and floors covered in boxes that could eventually accommodate furniture. Someday, we would look at the rooms in this house and it would be hard to remember what it looked like those first few months, when boxes sat untouched while we struggled to get used to new jobs, classes, and a shared life together. Someday, we would sit and argue over what went in which corner first, only to remember that nothing was there at all in the beginning. Although I had already learned a lot from our first two weeks of living together, the thing that surprised me the most about the moving process was how empty the place still felt. Once the boxes were gone and we arranged everything we had brought with us, there would be spaces left to fill. More than

anything, this house seemed to highlight the fact that two single lives had been newly joined together. It felt as though the house and I were both waiting, wondering what would happen within these walls.

Mike joined me, flopping on the floor and letting out a groan. In the past twenty-four hours, we had moved all of the remaining furniture from my apartment to the new house. Our arms and legs felt every mattress, stair, and sharp corner, the experience heightened by South Carolina's late summer humidity and heat. "That's it, I'm done. We don't have any more things. We can never get any more things—not unless the Army moves all of them and we just get to watch. If they come looking for me, you tell them that I'm here and I'm tired." I scooted down to the floor, knees to my chest, and stroked his hair. For most families, the Army does move all of their things; it's just that our things had been in separate states, and the Army only covers one move. "Absolutely. We'll watch, and I'll even make popcorn. No more moving from separate places—from now on, we live together the Army gets to move it all." He nodded, sitting up to take a long drink of water, glad that the moving season was over. As he closed his eyes, looking like he was ready for a nap, I tugged on his sleeve, jokingly, "But you do know there's going to be more stuff, right? If I'm going to move around the world every two or three years, I'm doing it turtle style—I'm taking my home with me piece by piece. And not just any pieces.

When we're done with these boxes, anything that we don't really love has to go. We only keep what we like, what we want to keep for a long time. If I'm packing it all up again, I want to be happy to see it at our new place." Mike raised an eyebrow, remembering the guest bedroom in his former apartment, which housed an unthinkable number of unopened boxes and tubs for the duration of his six month stay at Ft. Sill. He's moved so often in his life that living out of boxes seems normal rather than unusual. Nodding his head in agreement he sighed. "We're going to be those people, aren't we?" I looked down at him quizzically through my glasses, not understanding. "It's an Army thing… Since people have to move around so much, they always have to find a house to fit their furniture, or a house with a garage that can hold all of the pieces that can't fit. Now that we're together, we're going to end up with enough stuff to have something extra for a garage somewhere else." I eyed the room, nodded my head, and said, "Welcome to the turtle people." If I can't have roots that run deep, I want to make sure that they are tough enough to drag around.

* * *

If I were still near home, filling this house would be a mission for me and my mama. We would circle the rooms, sitting in different locations to try them out. My mama, like her mother, would take the floor first. They both claim that the different angle from down there is a valuable perspective when it comes to

imagining future needs. She would notice the reasonably high ceilings, a lack of crown molding, and the fact that the baseboards were in need of dusting. I would lean against the kitchen cabinets, standing in a corner between the sink and the dishwasher—the corner that reminded me the most of my parents' kitchen, where I used to stand every night and talk about my day as I helped my mom cook dinner. From that vantage point, I would wonder where we were going to store our big pots and pans now that we owned dishes large enough that they could feed more than two people. In the living room, she would join me on the couch, where we would spend hundreds of imaginary dollars putting up brightly colored curtains, lining the walls with frames, and finding a buffet large enough to act as both a bar and linen storage.

I would almost feel at home as we moved the furniture around each room, making sure that we found the place best suited to hold each piece before taking our final measurements. As a child, I often woke up to see my mother hauling a desk up the stairs, or would come down and find my spot in the living room located on a different wall than when I went to bed. My mother is the kind of woman who moves the furniture every time the wind changes, like a Mary Poppins with excellent spatial orientation skills. We would spend the afternoon cataloging the things we really needed, separating them from the things that we might just want. Our laughter would fill the empty corners as we remembered

my grandmother, MeeMee, saying to me as a child, "Girl, you want a lot of things." I would always flash back at her with a smile, saying, "Yes, yes I do." With measurements scribbled on a sheet of scrap paper, tape measure and cash in hand, we would make our way to a flea market or an antique shop to try our luck.

Thanks to years of experience and family tradition, I am no flea market novice. My parents both grew up on working farms and my early-rising ancestors imbued me with a love for old things, as well as a desire to rescue anything that can still be used. When I was a child, I longed to join my mother and Aunt Christy for one of their "sister dates," when they would meet for breakfast and a day at the flea market. I pouted at the thought of being left out, unable to understand that for all their wonder, flea markets are places where people are more concerned with milk glass than whether or not they are stepping on small feet. At the flea market, sweet looking grannies standing over piles of real silver have no problem shoving you out of the way, especially if they've found the last piece they need to complete their set. Mom and Aunt Christy's adventures were a continuation of their mother's; my MeeMee had been poking around flea markets and antique malls years before I came along, finding misplaced treasures that she would bring home along with a fair amount of what she described as "somebody's old junk," which she left behind. By the time I left

for college, I already had a sizeable collection of mismatched tea cups, saucers, and vintage linens, along with a mixed set of silverware MeeMee put together that could fit my child-sized hands. It wasn't the stuff of a typical hope chest, and I certainly wasn't waiting to use any of it until I was married—it was more like I was hoping to stock my future home with belongings that felt like friends.

At home, our flea market adventures would likely take place at the Tennessee State Fair Grounds, one of the largest in Nashville. Although their website assures me that they have events there year-round, as a child I only went there for the state fair and flea markets. During the fall, I would stroll through the outbuildings at the fair with my parents and younger sister, watching the livestock as they waited to be judged. My dad, in cowboy boots and jeans, would relive his days in the Future Farmers of America (FFA), pointing out the best features on each cow, pig, and horse that made its way to the ring. He always peppered his comments with stories, remembering that his Grandpa Duck never minded the pigs—he would just lean back, tug on his overalls, saying, "They don't stink… Just smells like money to me." In the outdoor spaces, we would stop for food from vendors, the air thick with steam, grease, and powdered sugar. Mom and dad would trade stories about setting tobacco and picking cotton as we watched demonstrations of old fashioned farming

equipment. It was like watching the pages of Laura Ingalls Wilder come to life, with the added pleasure of miniature donuts hot from the fryer.

We were never there for the rides; mom assured us that they were hastily put together, and that there was sure to be an accident as many times as they moved those things from place to place. While I am sure some part of my childish heart must have been disappointed that the neon lights and carnival music would always be just out of reach, for the most part, I don't remember feeling that way. Instead, I remember wondering which flavor of jam was going to be the favorite, whether I would finally be able to talk them into letting me bring a bunny home, and if I would ever learn to make lace like the kind that won all of the ribbons. When we left, we always smelled faintly of wood smoke, the vestige of some kind of pioneer exhibit no doubt.

By summer, the remnants of the state fair would be long gone though the vendors still offer barbecue and funnel cakes to the flea market crowd year round. Tent peaks crowd the space formerly occupied by the Ferris wheel and Tilt-a-Whirl, each awning placed as close as possible to the next in an effort to maximize the available space. In the exhibit halls, concrete floors are swept out, making room for antique furniture and decorations that lines the walls, turning them into temporary show rooms. No matter my age, I always feel an urge to reach out my hand and touch the pieces, registering the different sensations of

wood, metal, glass, and porcelain. As a child, my mother always reminded me to touch gently, and I still do as I run my hand alongside the furniture, wondering who owned it last and where they kept it. I pull open the tin doors to pie safes, tracing the small indentations that make up their pattern, and sneeze when I inhale a little too much dust. When I find a china hutch, I linger by its glass panes, envisioning my own collection housed safely inside. Like my former child-self, I can't help but approach large armoires with bated breath, wondering what is secreted inside as I open their double doors. Since it's a flea market, they are mostly swept clean, their former contents a mystery.

In one booth, there is always a collection of headboards in every shape and size, some iron, some wood, and some upholstered in fabric that has seen better days. As my fingers cup the smooth, shiny surface of iron bed knobs, I wonder if any of them are magic like in *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. Growing up, I walked slowly everywhere, afraid that I might miss something—a practice that still holds true at flea markets where I have no need to hustle and no real agenda for the day. No matter how old I am, I can't help but imagine what I would choose for a house of my own. These days, that house is a reality, but when I was younger that first house was still full of possibility.

Sometimes I would imagine a tiny apartment just big enough for one, the kind of place that you look for when you are just starting out. On those days, I would

look for pieces that were simple, beautiful, and doubled as storage for other things. On others, I would picture a small house with room for a steamer trunk at the end of the bed, and snug corners meant for sitting with a cup of tea. My younger self was surprisingly old. It was a house big enough for my future to take shape in, though I couldn't always see it clearly. In all that time, however, I don't think I ever imagined what it would mean to have a house that I would have to share.

* * *

The first time I rode in Mike's car we were probably on a date, though it wasn't our first. On our first official date, we traversed the University of South Carolina campus on foot, making our way from my freshman dorm to the relatively new Colonial Life Arena for a basketball game. It was Valentine's Day, something he had mostly tried to forget when he asked me out, and something I couldn't get out of my mind the entire evening. Had we gone to college anywhere else, an evening stroll in the middle of winter would have been unthinkable unless we were shrouded in snow boots and anoraks. In South Carolina, however, we considered ourselves bundled up in light coats, gloves, and hats. At the stadium, I tugged at the hem of my magenta shirt, uncomfortable before the evening had even really started. In a sea of garnet and black, it and I looked decidedly out of place, though Mike claimed he could not

tell. As I squirmed in my stadium seat, wishing I had thought to wear black or that I had something remotely clever to say, I wondered what this night might mean. Specifically, I wondered if this Valentine's Day basketball game was a date, or not. Sporting events fall in a tricky middle ground between date and non-date—especially when you are like me and don't usually attend many sporting events in the first place.

Despite our beginnings, neither of us really liked basketball. In the many years since our first date, we still have yet to add another set of tickets to the ones I have in a memory box. Truthfully, our mutual disinterest in basketball really didn't matter that night; we didn't watch that much of the game anyway. Surrounded by screaming fans and the sound of squeaking shoes on hardwood, we shared horrified glances as the USC "Kiss Cam" looked for couples to embarrass on the Jumbotron, and discussed proper strategy should we be caught on camera. To this day, ducking is the only one that I can really remember with any confidence. I don't think that either of us was brave enough to suggest a modest kiss on the cheek. Under the watchful eye of his parents' friends who sat only two seats over, we negotiated nearly holding hands by feigning an argument over who should have access to the middle armrest. Holding hands wasn't the advent of romance, it was merely being neighborly, a good exercise in

sharing. We shared hands again on the walk home to my dorm, our fingers hesitant and then certain, as we neared the end of the night.

* * *

Mike's first car, an old VW Bug, was long gone before I met him. When he was in high school, he exchanged it for a two-door Ford Explorer that he claimed was black, though it looked more like a deep navy to me. Perhaps the paint was just showing the effects of a few winters in Wisconsin, Mike's home before he moved to South Carolina. On the weekends that he didn't have to train with the Army Reserves, he would drive to my dorm and pick me up for an adventure at the end of a long school week. Back then, an adventure meant a trip to the movies, attending a home football game, or a ride to the local Fresh Market to put an end to evenings of dining hall tedium. We taught each other to cook in a tiny dorm apartment kitchen—a benefit of my sophomore year—marveling at our ability to eat something that looked like a meal my mother might fix, rather than take out or half a box of Pop-Tarts. Although the scale of our adventures was usually small, it never seemed to matter—the activities weren't really the point. The real adventure was in learning each other's stories well enough that we could repeat them back to one another, knowing just the right places to laugh.

Sitting in the passenger seat of his third car, a black jeep he bought as soon as he earned his officer's commission in the Army, it almost felt as though we were our college selves again. As we passed the flat South Carolina fields, bleached to a dull brown by mid-November, it seemed as though we should be on our way to one of our apartments rather than leaving our own home. Mike tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, matching the beat of a song that had been popular years before, still wearing his Army ROTC cap and sunglasses as though he were a student rather than an active duty soldier. The only signs that betrayed his age were the addition of a wedding ring that glinted every time it caught the light, and a few more lines around his eyes than I remembered seeing in the past—the result of deep smiles, too little sunscreen, and too much time spent out in the field.

As we moved down the road, I looked at the other cars on the interstate wondering what was going on inside their walls. The family in the minivan moved along at a steady pace, their young children amused by antics on a drop-down video screen my parents probably would have killed for on long road trips, worn down from a lengthy chorus of whose toys belonged to whom. A handful of young men lounged in the back of a pick-up, secure in the knowledge that they were probably headed just a little down the road, not far enough to justify seatbelts or airbags despite what their mothers and state laws might think.

I wondered what our car looked like to them, if they were even looking. We had a GPS on the dashboard, our clasped hands lay on the center console, and we both smiled every now and then when we thought of something worth saying, relieved to be together. On the whole, we looked like the picture of happily married domesticity. We were two nearly newlyweds heading out to the country to buy our first shared piece of furniture. I think I was even wearing a red flannel shirt, making the late fall picture perfectly complete. It almost seemed like something you would see in a car advertisement, with some kind of catchy slogan wreathed in seasonal gourds. But all the while, I couldn't help but wonder: Are we doing this right?

The question chafed at me, disrupting what should have been the ease of a perfect moment, the kind that you remember when you look back on the first few years of your marriage. I reached for Mike's phone, hoping to busy my hands and mind as I searched for the listing that had us on the road in the first place. The GPS chirped in the background, reminding us that we were still miles from our destination, though the lingering presence of the Columbia suburbs had given way to pastures and farms. As I scrolled past old Southern mantelpieces, wooden shutters, and slightly rusted metal signs, I thought about our first real vacation together, a trip we'd taken to Minnesota and Wisconsin the summer after I graduated from college. It was our first real trip alone as a couple

without family around, and Mike was ecstatic at the thought of showing me his hometown before I moved to Germany for a year. Although Mike spent most of his childhood moving from place to place, learning to reset his life each time his parents found a better job, he considered Wisconsin home. Apparently you get to choose your home state when you move around enough.

Early on in the trip, we made plans for a dream day: a wine tasting and picnic lunch at a vineyard in Minnesota, an afternoon of searching for rare books at a store in Stillwater, and a finale that included what Mike swore was the best German food in Hudson, Wisconsin. That day was all of those things. At the vineyard, we swished wine across our palates, only spitting it out if we really didn't like the taste. By the third "taste" I started to have the urge to dance around the room, which was lit by twinkle lights. We bought a picnic lunch from the gift shop, stocking a basket with wine, cheese, salami and bread, selecting the perfect hillside perch for our quilt on the lawn. As we ate our lunch, we were accompanied by the vineyard's dog, who set up camp near our feet and didn't leave our side until we were finished, though she never begged for any scraps. We held hands as we made our way through the bookstore, snapping a few pictures in the stacks as young people in love are sometimes wont to do. Purchases in hand, we drove across the St. Croix to Hudson, Mike's face content in a way I had never seen before. For the first time since we had

been together, he was home. We ended our day over platters of Jägerschnitzel, red cabbage, and Spätzle, the perfect send-off before a year we would spend apart. When I look at the pictures now, I can clearly see how happy we were. At the time, however, I was paralyzed by the thought that we *must* be doing this wrong. On a day when I should have felt romanced, I felt comfortable, at ease—words that I didn't associate with romance at all. Driving over the bridge to Hudson, I peppered Mike with questions, wondering if he felt the same way too. For him, it wasn't a matter of whether or not the day should have felt more romantic. All that mattered was that it was a good day, and that we were both happy with each other. Although I wouldn't have admitted it, it would have been easier to leave romance for a year. Leaving comfort, leaving home, that was something else entirely.

* * *

Three years later in South Carolina, I wondered if this moment would fade like the one in Wisconsin, so that the doubt in my mind would become a nonsensical echo rather than something worthy of scrutiny. While these moments of doubt seem like things that you should probably sort out before you get married rather than a year after you've declared your vows, distance plays tricks on those it likes to keep apart whether they are already married or not. For the past four years, we hadn't had the daily rituals of dating and marriage to

count on every day. Instead, we had developed new rituals of our own, hoping that they would prove equally effective. When we were together, we made each day count as a date, not worrying over the expense since we were essentially fitting several months-worth of dates into a short amount of time. When we were apart, we called each other religiously, learning to adapt as we changed time zones, shifts, and continents. We simultaneously breathed prayers of thanks and heaped curses on Skype when internet connections were dodgy and I built a collection of post-it notes over the course of my day, trying to remember all of the things I wanted to tell him when he could call from Iraq. Regardless of where we lived, we learned not to look too hard at our hefty phone bills, or at the miles points for different airlines. Despite our best efforts, they never added up to a free flight.

We had mastered all of these practices over the past four years, yet this mastery came with a price of its own. Now that distance was no longer an easy culprit to blame, we were responsible for each other in a way we never had been before—in a way that made me nervous. Although I would never admit it out loud, on days when we would fight it was reassuring to have something to blame other than who we were, or how we communicated as a couple. We could blame the distance, a bad day at work, the stress of long hours, or the Army—always the Army in a myriad of ways, though I knew I could no more separate

Mike from his love of the job than I could separate myself from a love of my own work. As we eliminated all of these sources of blame, it didn't occur to me that perhaps some of our problems would sort themselves out naturally. I just wondered what would happen if there were still problems and no other source than ourselves to blame. In truth, some days I think I was a better partner from a thousand miles away with a phone in my hand. I did my best to give my "phone husband" my undivided attention, even if the conversation felt stale, or I was tired. He didn't have to see my less attractive qualities on a daily basis. As I got used to my "in person" husband, I also had to get used to seeing the side effects of an imperfect version of myself. If I had confessed my fears about our marriage and our future Mike would have put them at ease, but I didn't want to let him—not yet. As long as I held on to them, I could pretend that they might be all in my head.

Mike squeezed my hand and smiled reassuringly, as though he could read the thoughts I wasn't willing to share. He pointed to the end of the fencerow that was just beginning to emerge and asked incredulously, "Is that it? That's a furniture store?" I wrinkled my brow, confused as well—it wasn't like any furniture store that I had ever seen. We had almost given up on finding the place at all, until we saw a white-framed sign proclaiming "Peach Festival Gardens," just past the point where you could no longer make the turn into their tree-lined

driveway. Gravel rolled and crunched beneath the tires, mingling with pine straw as we made our way up from the road, uncertain of whether we were pulling up to a store or someone's home. Thankfully there were no "beware of dog" signs, so even if we were making a mistake it would just cost us just a little embarrassment rather than a limb. As we pulled up to the house, I breathed a sigh of relief to see other cars and outbuildings, signs that there might be something for sale. Before today, Peach Festival Gardens had just been a Facebook page on the internet, a random find through someone else's profile preferences. Now that it was in front of us, it was more than we ever could have imagined from any pictures.

When I opened my car door, I was greeted by one of the family dogs who sniffed at my knees and invited me to come out and play. Although I knew I was still in South Carolina, it almost felt like I was back in Tennessee visiting one of my grandmother's friends for the afternoon. I was surrounded by trees, farm animals, and fields. If I were still five, I would have run all over the property, overjoyed and interested in finding out everything I could as quickly as possible. Since I no longer had access to the latitude given to five-year-olds, I contented myself with careful observations, covert jumping for joy, and running my hands along every available surface unaware of dust, dirt, and possible price tags. As we approached the outbuildings, chickens pecked at the ground rooting through

fallen leaves for bugs, ruffling their feathers as they stepped around old wrought iron statues, pausing to rest near a pile of old shutters. They eyed us carefully, marking us as newcomers, and then turned back to their business moving at a steady, rocking pace. Their domestic industry was soon interrupted by the presence of a peacock, who the owners affectionately addressed as Burt. His plumes of navy, teal, and iridescent green seemed to glow, separating him from the brown branches and fallen leaves behind him. He was used to the attention and admiration, as though he counted on standing apart from the crowd. A cat twined around my booted feet, taking advantage of my wonder as she made herself at home. I felt as though I was experiencing my first day of kindergarten again, the exact moment when the teacher told us we could spend the rest of the day playing in any center we wanted. I wanted to investigate them all.

We set out hand in hand, each of us with different intentions. Mike approaches shopping as he does most things: with a dogged intention. He had a mission, and what's more, he had pictures from prior research. To his mind, we could search out the pieces that had interested us, rule them out one by one, and return home with the best possible piece to suit our current circumstances. It was a well-thought out plan, except for one important detail—he brought me with him. Although I knew on a rational level that we were there to find a buffet or a sideboard, preferably one that could house liquor as well as table linens, my

limbs did not seem to understand this logic. Instead, they kept bringing me to tables that were far too small (but painted the most bewitching shade of green), art deco dressers painted a sharp black with ivory details (that did not even remotely match our bedroom), and old library card catalogs that we could surely find some use for over time (though they would never fit in the jeep on the way home). I itched to call my mother, longing to share the victory of a new place to hunt for treasures, but I grabbed Mike's hand instead, pointing him toward some steamer trunks and Civil War artillery—items that quickly got him off mission too.

After I recovered from my initial sense of wonder, I noticed another couple walking through the grounds, accompanied by Burt and a few dogs. In that moment, I felt a sudden kinship with those flea market grannies from my childhood. Of course they were defensive when it came to looking for that last piece of silverware. They were so close to completing a full set, and an interloper might derail the whole venture. Although I didn't necessarily know that the perfect piece of furniture for our house was there, I had a gut feeling—and I didn't want those other people to find it first. I am aware that flea markets and furniture sales do not always bring out my best nature. Fortunately, there are usually enough objects and curiosities that my competitive streak can be cowed by my appreciation for all of the possibilities that a flea market holds. Unlike

estate sales, which fill me with equal parts of dread and discomfort, flea markets remove objects from their original homes so that I can see them as they are, rather than mourning the fact that they used to be a part of someone else's home and life story.

Although we found many things that we wanted, and a few that future versions of ourselves could justify as "needs," we had no luck furnishing the life we had at present until we entered the last building on the property. Walking through its doorway felt similar to walking through the sheds and barns on my grandmother's farm, though I can't recall whether it was really a shed or not. Its plywood-lined walls hinted at recent construction, though it was certainly built to withstand whatever elements came its way. As we walked across the concrete floor, a strong, musty scent of dust and enclosed space permeated the room, causing me to sniffle and sneeze, wiping at my eyes in the low-light. We admired old cameras lined up in a row, taking them down to see if they were still in working order, and we gingerly examined lamps made out of gears, blades, and old industrial equipment, trying not to accidentally cut ourselves in the process. Though the blades had been dulled, they still looked rather menacing. The room was full, but not overcrowded, with the larger pieces of furniture placed against the walls. Plywood peeked out beneath paintings and mirrors that were staged on the walls, and every available surface served as a means to

display more items for sale: glass canisters (large and small), landscape paintings in ornate frames, antlers, old tins with faded print labels, clay vases and vessels from a local artist in earth-tone glazes, and metal fans that looked like something Restoration Hardware might try to copy. The spaces beneath desks and tables were at a premium as well. Most were filled with stacks of old leather suitcases in shades of bottle-green and tan, some including stickers from faraway places.

We moved mirrors coated in a fine film and washboards as we made our way through the room, stopping to marvel at an enormous cradle that looked as though it was woven from reeds. I couldn't imagine a small baby within its depths, try though I might. Standing in front of a large dressing table, I looked at my reflection and almost expected to see my parents' bedroom staring back at me—the piece was almost identical to the one I had helped to dust for years on the weekend, right down to the marble tabletop. Though some part of me wanted to take it home, I knew it would be a nightmare to move it from place to place, especially if we ever ended up being the ones to move it. As we moved toward the back corner, I felt like I entered one of those 1940 films, where the hardboiled detective leans back and catches a glimpse of legs in the doorway, looking up until he finally finds a face. In this case, however, I was the detective and the legs belonged to a 1920s buffet, its tiny wooden canister wheels still intact and fully functional. Though the buffet itself was large, with two deep

drawers and a side cabinet on each side, its legs were slender, complimenting a design free of ostentation. Mike and I each opened a door, debating the value of the circular brass pulls, which were unlike anything either of us had seen before. They looked like the outline of a full brass moon. I could fit my finger into the outline of the decorative border at the bottom—it was fluted, like the pie crust decoration my mother taught me to make by repeatedly pinching the dough around my curved forefinger.

The store owner peered through the doorway, entering when he realized he might have a potential sale. As we dithered over where we could place the buffet and what our needs might be, he leaned back and mentioned that while we could purchase the buffet on its own, it was actually a part of a three piece set: a buffet, side table, and china hutch, all in the same spare style. Honestly, the man probably had me at the words "china hutch," but for the sake of practicality we made a show of taking out the measurements I had hastily scrawled before leaving the house. They were a perfect fit, the kind of coincidence that makes me believe in flea market magic. I slipped my hand into my purse, clutching my checkbook and the sleeve of money I had brought with me. My mother had taught me well—never assume that any flea market or furniture dealer will have access to a card reader, and always know that you can usually score a better deal paying in cash.

For some, haggling is the whole point of going to a flea market or a furniture sale. They learn to read the sellers, go to different booths to price out the best option, and always offer well below what they are actually willing to pay. In most cases, this is a fair arrangement, as the seller knows that most buyers are interested in a price that is more conversational than literal. For these buyers, the deal is almost as important as the object itself. I am always uncomfortable when it comes to haggling—I rarely like to ask questions in a store when I can't find something, much less when it comes to the best possible price that a dealer can offer. When we go to antique stores together, my mother and I usually just try to be nice enough that the seller will offer us a better price, though we don't throw up our hands if we are asked to pay the amount on the tag. Mike, however, fits somewhere in between these two extremes in a place I couldn't have imagined before meeting him. He is always willing to ask, never approaches a question with shame, and manages to ask in such a way that the person in charge always feels like they are doing him a favor.

It seemed as though we had everything we could possibly need to make our purchase. We would emerge from the day's adventure victorious, hauling the pieces we could carry back today behind us with promises to pick up the rest the next afternoon. I imagined us driving home in the last bits of the November sunshine, our armrest occupied by a table leg that needed just a little more room.

By the time we went to sleep that night, our home would look a little less like a bare, beige box, and a little more like a space intended for living. I wanted that space; I needed to feel like it was possible to create a home even if I didn't exactly know what I was doing. And yet, I couldn't' make myself put down the money—not yet. It wasn't a matter of finding something better, or wondering if we really had made the right decision. Instead, it was as though I was waiting for the real adults to show up and walk up through the whole process. I was twenty-five-years-old and still looking over my shoulder for my mother, waiting on her to share in the experience. As I turned to Mike, loathe to reveal how much like a two-year-old I felt, he reached for his phone and asked one of the kindest things I have ever heard: "How about we send some pictures to your mom, just to see what she thinks?" As I chattered on the phone to my mother, sharing the story of all that we had seen and experienced that afternoon, I watched Mike make the final arrangements for the next day. Catching his eye every now and then in the afternoon light, I wondered if this was what it meant to be married, to be at home.

CHAPTER 2: VEIL

On the morning of our first wedding anniversary living in Columbia, I woke with a feeling of dread. It was a familiar feeling, one that wrapped its sinews around my stomach and squeezed, as though to let me know it was there. I moved quietly, slipping from beneath the quilt in one swift movement, trying not to disturb Mike so that he could get a few more moments of sleep before the day would officially begin. In many ways, this was a Sunday like any other—I woke up first, and tried to fight the urge to leap out of bed, telling myself that I could sleep for another hour so that we could wake up together. And, like nine mornings out of ten, my need to be out of bed as soon as the light hit the windows won out. I made my first cup of tea in a quiet kitchen, savoring the consistency of such a ritual as I set my kettle to boil, spooned loose tea into a slender paper filter, and watched the leaves unfurl as they met with the hot water, only to be cooled by a splash of cream a few minutes later. Teacup in hand I sat on the couch, where I could see our engagement and wedding pictures scattered around the room. Each frame contained a finite moment, telling its own story without telling the whole story.

As a child I loved weddings, a fortunate thing given the number that I attended. I went to my first as a lap baby, sitting on my mother's knee as my Great Aunt Virginia married her former brother-in-law, a few years after her sister Jean died of Alzheimer's. My mother sat nervously in the pew, monitoring every coo and delighted shriek, afraid that I would disturb the ceremony. I don't remember being a disturbance, nor do I really remember the event itself—truthfully, the thing I remember most about Aunt Jen is her coleslaw, which is still the only recipe my mother uses. By my second wedding I was far more alert, much to the chagrin of the other guests. When Mandy Robertson got married in the early 1990s, I am sure that she planned plenty of things. She may have imagined what it would feel like to wear her white dress with its full skirt, twirling in front of a mirror, or what it would mean to get married on the lawn of her parents' home as she prepared to create a home of her own. What she couldn't have planned on was having her reception interrupted by the wails of a small white-blonde scrap on the dance floor, her face flushed from one too many twist-and-shouts as a guest's spike heel pierced her small foot. While I still don't recall very much about the ceremony, I cannot forget the impressions of my first reception—white ruffles, sharp pain, and ice coolers that were suddenly needed for more than just drinks.

By the time I was twenty-one I had been to well over a dozen weddings, the by-product of having a large circle of family and friends. Though I loved listening to the vows, admired every flower, and sighed over the beautiful dresses, I never really imagined my own wedding until my junior year of college when Ben and Sophie got married. Although they eventually became dear friends to us both, initially Ben was Mike's friend—a fellow ROTC cadet and a valued confidante who asked him to be a groomsman at his wedding. As we drove up to northern Virginia, sitting through hours of traffic in the rain, I couldn't quite believe what we were about to witness. This was not the first wedding we had attended for our peers. Not even a year earlier, we had celebrated one of my dear friends as she married her high-school sweetheart, cheering as they left the church reception to embrace their new life. Over the course of their engagement as I had gotten to know Ben and Sophie better, it seemed natural that they should be together. They complemented each other, and seemed ready to start their lives together. As I watched them repeat their vows at a vineyard in Virginia I was captivated by the love on their faces. They seemed lit from inside with incandescent joy as they marched back up the aisle, husband and wife. This, I understood—the desire to bind your future with someone else, someone who loved you and made you a better person. What I could not understand was why they were getting married *now*. They knew they

were getting married only to be separated for six months while she finished her degree and he started his job with the Army.

Five years later, as I sat waiting for my husband to leave on yet another anniversary due to his job with the Army, the irony of my former confusion seemed both laughable and painful. That night, as we danced at Ben and Sophie's reception, I had no concept of what it was going to mean for her to be an Army wife—or what that definition might look like for me in the years to come. I am still trying to find a definition of that term that fits how I think of myself. What I do remember, however, is Mike whisking me outside the moment that it got too hot on the dance floor, where we danced all by ourselves as the reception continued inside. Mike does not like to dance, but he kept dancing anyway, spinning me so that the dim lights shimmered, reflected in the folds of my silver silk skirt. As we danced, I remember consciously trying to inscribe every detail of that moment into my memory while the chorus of "Come on, Eileen" played in the background, moving our bodies together in time. Although we weren't married yet, and I had no way of knowing that our path to matrimony would include breaking up and falling back together, that moment held the promise of a first dance for me. In the years to come, I found myself clinging to that glimpse of a future I finally admitted I might want.

* * *

The first time we got married, it was supposed to be a secret. As we prepared to say our vows in May 2011, a part of me wondered if we would ever have a chance to have another ceremony, much less another year of marriage. I tried to quiet that voice in my head, the one that said Oprah had to get people on her show from somewhere—bereaved military spouses who had stories that made you want to reach for a box of tissues and a pint of ice cream. At some point, the spouses sobbing on her sofa had been newlyweds, fiancées, girlfriends, women who had envisioned a future with their partner. And then something horrible happened, and there they were with Oprah, crying on a meticulously upholstered couch. As more of our friends deployed and came back home, some wounded in mind, some in body, others perfectly fine as far as we knew, it felt like the odds had to be going up that something terrible was going to happen to one of them.

As we waited in the hallway of the Manhattan, Kansas courthouse for our Friday evening wedding appointment, I fidgeted with the hem of my dress, tracing the edges where the smooth fabric met roses and a Swiss-dot pattern. I had bought it on a whim only two weeks earlier, back when we thought we would wait until after the deployment to get married. I hadn't even needed a dress at the time, but as Bridgette searched for something new to wear during her husband's mid-deployment leave—the Army version of R&R—and Amber

searched for an Easter dress, I started looking for something new. It was a momentary distraction, a moment of lightness as three women tried to ignore the reality of their situation, deliberately choosing to plan for the future. Amber and Bridgette's husbands were both in Afghanistan for the next year, and I was about to join their ranks as someone who would be waiting. It had only been two weeks since that shopping trip, but I felt older, weighed down by reams of paperwork giving me rights to Mike's information, by the knowledge of what would happen in the event of a casualty notification, by the acceptance that this deployment was really going to happen.

Although I couldn't imagine it then, a year and a half later I would watch my bridesmaids walk down a barn aisle wearing dresses that were similar in color, though they had been purchased with a great deal more forethought. They would be accompanied by Mike's groomsmen, all but one of them wearing dress blues and returned from deployment within the past two years. We would joke that it was the first time we had all been in the same place without worrying about someone overseas—it was funny, but only because it was true. On that second wedding day, I would find myself walking past that first wedding, the year of turmoil that preceded it, and the year filled with worry to follow, as I passed by the faces of our family and friends. On our first wedding day,

however, that second wedding felt more like a distant, ephemeral hope than something we could count on with certainty.

* * *

We woke up at five o'clock that morning, blearily searching for the alarm as Mike punched the snooze button for a second time. He untangled himself from the covers in the dark, pulled on his ACUs, and crept out the door to work as I tried to fall back asleep, still wondering if we were doing the right thing. We had plans to meet at the apartment before attending our wedding ceremony at five o'clock that night. Afterward, we would keep our dinner reservations, which seemed as close to a proper reception as one could get on a week's notice. The green print-out from the courthouse still sat on his kitchen counter, with the available judge's name circled in blue ink, surrounded by tiny stars. As I called the judges, going down the list, I can't remember if I drew the stars out of nerves, or a sense of victory after I found someone who said yes. I made the call only a few days earlier, after Mike came in the door with a simple question. As he pulled off his boots in the entryway, he called down the hall, "So, do you think you'd want to get married this week?"

Normally, this is a moment where I would have asked him to repeat the question, not quite believing what I had heard the first time. Despite the offhand nature of his question, however, he had been perfectly clear. Still waiting for my

answer, he walked into the living room, avoiding the boxes I had started to pack while he was at work. I sat, stunned, working through my thoughts. I hadn't been this surprised since January, when he called to tell me that we would have to cancel our wedding. That morning, as I made appointments with dress shops and crossed items off my to-do list, he found out he had orders to deploy sometime around the middle of May. In the weeks and months that followed, we debated marriage as though it were a topic worthy of a congressional hearing. We talked to family and friends, each one sharing conflicting advice, as we tried to find our own answers.

My parents volunteered to have a wedding any time we wanted, whether it was now or some date in the future. Though this was the first time they had ever hosted a wedding in conjunction with Army timelines, they were learning that flexibility is key. Aunts, uncles, and cousins made soothing sounds as they learned of our change in plans. Some told us to go ahead and get married, citing that it would save us in insurance money and legal malarkey should anything happen. Others speculated that it might be easier to wait, that we'd have to hurry to make things happen with only a few months left until the expected deployment date. More than one Army couple told us to get married now and have a big wedding later, something that was completely normal in the military world though it would puzzle some civilians. Mike's parents assured us that any

wedding we had would be beautiful, but voiced concerns, saying that a wedding in haste just wouldn't be as special, that we'd regret it someday, that I would be risking the stigma of becoming a widow if anything happened to Mike. I still don't understand what that means. On a good day, I think it means that they were afraid, and that they still wanted to be the primary point of contact for their son. On other days, I cannot understand why that phrase would ever leave a parent's mouth.

I wasn't worried about any stigma. I didn't even think such things existed. I was, however, worried about the things that I might miss—that we might miss—if we didn't get married before the deployment. While he could understand my perspective, Mike was more reluctant. If we had a wedding now, that would mean that the deployment was really happening, that there would be no final reprieve as there had been in the past, and that our wedding wouldn't be the one we had planned. Although there were many difficulties in preparing for his deployment, I think the one that hurt him the most was the possibility that he wouldn't be able to give me the future he wanted. As we passed what would have been our wedding day, spending May 14, 2011 sulking on the couch, we both began to feel like it was time to make a change—a change that Mike proposed in our doorway only two days later. After trying to convince him to get married for months, it seemed strange to hear the request coming

from him, and even stranger that I wouldn't immediately want to answer "Yes." If I answered "yes," this would really be happening, a wedding far away from home, from my family, and from the future I had envisioned. I opened up my laptop and searched the marriage requirements for the state of Kansas. We would have to move quickly; Kansas requires a three day waiting period before you can pick up your license, and the business hours were all during Mike's work day. I quickly called my mother, and asked her to FedEx my birth certificate. Then I called Bridgette and asked: "Do you want to help me get a marriage license?" Her delighted laugh and crow of victory was all the answer I needed.

* * *

The morning of our first wedding started a second time only a few hours later, as Mike came back in the door. He laughed, tossing his boots in the closet as he changed clothes, saying that his commanding officers and office mates had kicked him out of the office. He grinned and gave an impression of his boss, who had taken one look at him and said, "Findlay! What are you doing here? On your wedding day, you *do not* report in." Having never been married before, we were ignorant of this policy, though thankful for its existence. Over breakfast, we tallied the things we would need—something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, and something civilian appropriate for the

courthouse. Mike hadn't started packing yet, though I made a new list every day. I was set to start graduate school in South Carolina in the fall, so all of his things would need to go into storage until he came back. I estimated the number of tubs we would need to pack clothes, papers, books, and movies, but the things we used regularly were still in place, giving the apartment a sense of permanence. We still used the dishes we'd bought a year earlier on my first visit to his new apartment, he still kept his toiletries in the guest bathroom so as not to wake me up when he showered and shaved early in the morning. Only the piles of uniforms, body armor, and gloves in the spare room gave us away, reminding us that the indistinguishable piles of camouflage on the floor would eventually need to go into two Army bags.

I set each item on the nightstand as I found them, arranging them in a composition similar to what I had seen in wedding photographs. As I ran around the apartment, it felt like I was on a spontaneous wedding treasure hunt. It was easy to find the bottle of orange blossom perfume that I had brought back from Germany the year before—the tiny bottle was one of the few that I could easily take through airport security. I bought it with my sister in Berlin, the same city where Mike and I had gotten engaged only a few months earlier, in a tiny store called Frau Tonis just off the Hackescher Markt. The store was beautiful, with creamy white walls, airy linen drum shades hanging from the ceiling, fresh

flowers in simple vases, and trays of perfumes in large glass bottles. We were the only guests at the time, and the owner let us try all of the scents, even offering to make us one of our very own. My sister, giddy at the thought of being the maid of honor, helped me pick out a perfume for every day and one I could wear for my wedding. We both agreed it smelled like a bride—hopeful, joyous, but not cloyingly sweet—our smiles reflected in the many mirrors on the wall.

A search through my purse yielded our something borrowed, the dog tags that Mike had given me while we were in college. He gave them to me shortly after we had started dating, maybe a week after I accidentally blurted out "I love you" as I got out of the car. He answered "I love you, too," though he didn't quite register what either of us had said until he had almost made it out of the parking lot. He told me to keep them the afternoon that he left me in my parents' driveway, hours after a long road trip from South Carolina to Tennessee. We had planned to take the road trip for months; he was supposed to spend a few weeks with my family after his graduation. Instead, we broke up on the North Carolina-Tennessee state line, and I spent the afternoon in a state of disbelief, dog tags in hand. Despite all of the reasons I had to get rid of them, I kept them in the back of a desk drawer. When we got back together six months later, they greeted him like an old friend when he came to visit. My trust in

them, my trust in him, has made them mine, though they are really just a part of him he's allowed me to keep. In the months to come, I would hold them in my hands, moving my fingers over the small beads that form the chain as though they were a rosary, naming a different hope and a different worry with each one until my hands bore their imprint.

At the last minute, I also added the pearl and diamond earrings I received from my parents at Christmas, hoping it would make me feel like they were there. My sister and I had both received a set; they were our final presents to open that year. Mom and Dad always like to save a special gift for last, something that we can open together that will end the day on a perfect note. We squealed over them and put them on right away, turning our heads so that we could show them off. My sister wears hers so that the diamond sits at the top, I wear mine so that the diamond sits at the bottom—my mother just laughs at the reminder that we couldn't be more different if we tried. They match a set that she owns, a gift from Dad for an anniversary. A year and a half later, I would wear them again at my second wedding, along with my mother and my sister. My father cleared his throat more than once, though I don't know if he cried. It might have just been the rain as we walked from the bridal suite to the barn under a large white umbrella.

* * *

We waited for our lunch order at McAlister's holding hands across the table, choosing to sit in a roomy booth because it was our wedding day, which justified better seats. I eyed my glass of sweet tea, noting its color and ice-to-tea ratio, still not quite trusting that this was the one location in Kansas where I could drink the tea without wanting to spit it back out again. This tasted like something I could find in my mother's kitchen, rather than a stiff dose of unsweetened tea blunted by a pink packet of Sweet n' Low. Mike hurried to the front of the restaurant, pretending that he needed to speak with the waiter about our order, only to return with a small silver box instead of the chicken salad sandwich I expected, and a pleased smile on his face. As I opened his gift, secretly cursing the fact that I hadn't thought of that particular detail, he said, "I just thought, you know, it's your wedding day—you've got to have something new. And they let me out of work in time to go to the store." When I opened the box and saw a small silver heart on a delicate chain, I cried. Today was going to be full of something new.

I'm not sure what most couples talk about over lunch the day that they get married. Some people may not get a chance to see each other at all, given the number of bridal luncheons and groomsmen outings that occur. As we talked over our particular pre-nuptial meal, however, I had a feeling that our conversation was anything but normal. Though we were certain of our decision

to get married that day, we just couldn't quite work out what it would mean. Were we going to be married-married? Would this count as our real beginning, or would that be the wedding that we had later with our family and friends? What did it say about us, about our marriage, if we had this wedding, but didn't really tell anyone about it? And if we did tell anyone, who would we tell? Although we knew that this was going to be an important day for us, we wanted to make sure that it didn't wind up being about finances, insurance, or family opinions, important considerations though they might be. This was going to be our decision, and it was up to us to define what it meant.

In halting sentences, we sketched out the parameters of what we thought this first wedding might mean, though we wouldn't really know its significance in our marriage until much later. At a time when everything felt uncertain and subject to change, we were claiming that day as something only for us, something normal that couldn't be touched by the rest of the madness and uncertainty that came with this deployment. It was a moment for us to declare to the future that we did in fact *have* a future—one in which I would be notified first if something were to happen, where my name would fill in all of the necessary blanks on the pre-deployment paperwork. We would tell our closest friends, the ones that we would need to lean on most during the deployment, my sister, and my parents, though we didn't know when or how. Ultimately, we decided to

leave Mike's parents and everyone else in the dark, at least for the time being. We didn't want to spend the rest of our time together fielding phone calls or trying to justify our decisions. And when Mike left, I certainly didn't want to be answering any questions about our marriage on my own. As the hour moved closer to five o'clock, I knew he was starting to breathe a sigh of relief. He would be able to take care of me for the rest of his life, if not mine. As soon as we got home and prepared to get ready, we called my mom and sister, opening with the line, "Guess who's getting married today?" Their jubilation and request for plenty of pictures felt like a sign that maybe we were doing things right.

* * *

As I slipped on my rose colored dress and brown peep-toe shoes, I didn't stop to think about the wedding that might have been if this deployment had never happened. There wasn't any time for such thoughts. We dressed quickly, knowing that we wouldn't have the luxury of dawdling afforded to most brides and grooms—if we were late, our judge might leave. We also had to arrive with enough time to meet our witnesses, Bridgette and Greg; we had already told the judge that her clerk, Doris, could leave for the evening since we were bringing witnesses of our own. Part of me felt a little bit bad for sending Doris away. I didn't know her; maybe she really needed the money she earned by being a witness, or maybe she hated having to stay later on a Friday afternoon. Unlike

Bridgette and Greg, however, she didn't possess the key trait we required from witnesses—friends who felt like family—so she got to leave work at her usual time. Something old, something new, and something borrowed in hand, we were ready to make our trip downtown. Although we'd very nearly given up, I found a spray of blue flowers in the kitchen, their petals dry and feather-light, waiting for us to find them at the last minute. I tucked it into the buttonhole of Mike's black corduroy blazer for good measure. Our wedding message to the future could use all of the good luck we could muster.

We drove downtown, passing the jewelry store where we had bought our rings two weeks earlier after two or three more weeks of deliberation on my part. Reed & Elliott was a small store, the oldest jewelry store in Manhattan, tucked into a line of shops in the older part of downtown. It reminded me of the old town square area in Springfield, where my mother grew up, with its cheery sidewalks, broad awnings, and buildings that date back to the early 1900s. We sat in their store for hours, trying on rings and debating which options we liked best. The owners sat with us, understanding that our indecisiveness probably had more to do with our timeline than the rings themselves. As we passed their window, we laughed at the thought of being married while our rings were still somewhere in transition, perhaps still liquid metal on a workbench, or languishing in the post office waiting to be delivered. Mike's wedding ring and

my engagement ring were finished two days before he deployed. He slipped his ring on his dog tags the morning he deployed to Iraq, sure he would lose it if he slipped it on and off every day before going to work. My wedding ring lagged behind, its filigree imprint engraved somewhere around the time that we said goodbye. I received it three weeks later in the mail, after it made its way from Manhattan, Kansas to my parents' home in Tennessee, where I was waiting for my next move and my first semester of graduate school to begin. Despite our promises to keep this first wedding a secret, I couldn't help but slip the ring on my finger, telling myself it was a sign, evidence of a plan—lots of plans—that were still to come.

While we waited at the courthouse, Mike and Greg talked about their upcoming deployment, trading information and jokes to pass the time. Bridgette tried to keep me distracted, remembering the first of her two weddings just after New Year's Day, two years before we met. Although I don't remember all of the details she described, I remember feeling so comforted by the thought that someone had done this before me, and that her marriage had turned out just fine. She couldn't wait to give her husband, Josh, the news the next time he called in from Afghanistan, saying that he had forgotten more than once that we weren't already married. When Judge Hochhauser called us into her chambers, Mike and I entered the door hand in hand. I wondered if we needed to bring Bridgette

and Greg, or if this was a mere formality before the ceremony itself. Judge Hochhauser didn't make us wait very long to find out, as she welcomed us into her office and asked us to take a seat. Her chambers were filled with framed diplomas and certifications, pictures she had taken during her many travels, and books lined the walls. She tilted her head to the side as she studied us, brunette curls bobbing over her forehead, and then she began asking questions.

In some ways, I remember this moment more than the words of the actual ceremony itself. Some of her questions were practical: did we have rings that we wanted to exchange, was there anything we wanted to be sure to include in the ceremony, had we written vows or were we going to stick with tradition. Given the lack of tradition in our circumstances, we decided to tie our vows to the generations who had spoken them before us. It felt like one more chance to get time and fate on our side. Other questions felt more like a marriage interview combined with pre-marital counseling, an attempt on her part to ensure that we really knew each other and knew what marriage would mean for us in the future. As I sat in the leather chair clutching Mike's hand, partially out of excitement and partially out of nerves, I was thankful I hadn't known there was something else to prepare for, even though after five years I probably could have given an answer to whatever question she asked. Although I know this process had a bureaucratic function and was probably a means to ensure that we weren't

marrying to try to defraud the government, to me it felt more like a way for us to get to know her so that we were getting married by a kind of friend, rather than a complete stranger. She laughed at our stories from college, nodded her head as we recounted our struggles, and finally pronounced us ready to be married. In thirty minutes she managed to decide we were right for each other, even though the process had taken us at least five years and more than one heartfelt conversation.

We have a few pictures from our first wedding, taken with a camera I remembered to charge at the last minute. Bridgette served as witness, maid of honor, and photographer all at once. Although I have often wished there were more of them, or that they were taken in an older, grander looking courtroom that didn't have florescent lighting, looking at them always reminds me of more than what the moment looked like. When I see those pictures, I always remember exactly how I felt at age twenty-four on my first wedding day. The courtroom was a modern affair, something that they had renovated within the past ten or fifteen years, though it still retained a solid wood paneled door that was more in keeping with the aged exterior of the courthouse. The walls were painted beige, meant to inspire neither passion nor hope, and the carpet was a dull gray, intended to hold up under many years of foot traffic. From the windows, we could see the sun break through the trees planted in front of the

courthouse, defying the day's forecast of rain. We walked past the small row of seats designated for an audience, standing between the light wooden desks meant for lawyers and the broad platform that comprised Judge Hochhauser's bench. As we clasped hands in front of her, we looked more like two teenagers standing nervously at the senior prom than two adults about to get married.

I stared at Mike throughout the ceremony, trying to remember every detail of how he looked, what he said, how I felt, but it passed by so quickly. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that they ask for you to have witnesses at these things—you need to have someone there to remind you that it was all real, that you promised these things in front of other people. We had no rings to exchange, only promises for the unforeseeable future. We grinned as the judge began her preamble, incorporating details from our pre-marital briefing, but our faces grew solemn when it was time to say our vows. My voice sounded strange to my ears, as though it came from someone else—someone who knew better than I did, someone completely sure of this decision. I wondered if that solemn, secure person was going to remain present after the wedding, and hoped desperately that she would. I could use some of her confidence and faith. As Mike said his vows, the words echoed and receded, almost faster than I could register them. In the moments that I couldn't focus on the words that he was saying, I tried to remember instead the look of proud commitment on his face.

When I spoke, I felt suddenly shy, realizing that this was one of the few moments in my life when I would speak into silence, completely aware of what I was saying and what it meant for our future. In the seconds before the judge pronounced us husband and wife, I held my breath, wondering when the adults would arrive to say that this could not happen, that we were too young, that we weren't ready. Instead, we both said "I do," kissed in a courtroom, and signed our names for the official record under the titles of husband and wife.

In the moments after our first wedding, we posed for pictures outside the Manhattan, Kansas courthouse, hoping that the rain would hold off for a few more minutes. We invited our friends to join in our dinner, but found ourselves walking to the restaurant alone, secretly grateful for the time to get to know ourselves as husband and wife. As we walked in the door to Harry's, I almost expected for our friends and family to be there, just like any normal wedding reception. My shoes echoed against the rich wood floors, and although we had been there more than once, I stopped to appreciate the ornate ceilings, glamorous chandeliers, and wingback chairs that adorned the dining room. Thanks to skilled restoration work, Harry's looked as though it hadn't changed since the 1920s when the building was originally used as a hotel. Mike had brought me there for the first time two years earlier as a peace offering for a fight we had before I moved to Germany. That night, we discussed our plans for the future

and our commitment to making a long distance relationship work. It only seemed fitting to return as we were about to begin a long distance marriage. As we looked at each other over our menus we weighed our options, seeing for the first time why these details are already decided well in advance at a normal wedding. Our heads felt almost incapable of making any more decisions, having just made one of the most important ones in our life together so far. When our food arrived, delivered by a most understanding waitress, she took our picture. Perhaps it was the flash, or maybe she captured us at just the right moment—at our table for two, we glowed.

* * *

In the first year of our marriage, we spent about fifty days together and three-hundred-fifteen days apart. Over that year, our second wedding became a kind of talisman. Every time we had a fight, a bad day, or just missed each other, we counted on July 14, 2012 a little more. Initially, when we were planning a wedding without a deployment in mind, we saw our wedding day as a gathering of our dearest friends and family, an opportunity to take beautiful pictures that we would look at for years to come, and a time for us to make a lifelong commitment to each other. During the deployment, that day became a time when I wouldn't need to be attached to my cell phone afraid to miss a call, because we would be at the same place at the same time. It became a day when

we could celebrate our friends and family, who supported us through the deployment with letters, phone calls, and care packages. We hoped it would be a moment for creating bonds between our families, though we knew that might be difficult. My family still partially blamed his parents for the first time we broke up, and his family seemed resistant to my habit of speaking up, and the fact that Mike would have more family to choose from.

Despite these familial challenges, it would be a time to celebrate the fact that we wouldn't be living apart for that much longer. As we prepared for a lifetime of moving and changes, it would be our only chance to have all of the people that we loved together at one time, in one place. Our families were growing older, particularly our grandparents, and we wanted as much time with them as possible. On the Thursday before our wedding, however, we found ourselves in mourning. Relatives and friends flew in early to be present for Mike's grandfather's funeral, though Mike was unable to break away from training in Oklahoma in time. We all hoped and prayed that we would make it through the weekend without another loss, though we learned that Mike's grandmother Mimi was in precarious shape. We moved forward hesitantly at first, though we grew braver as the morning of our wedding grew closer. At our first wedding, we had already promised our lives; we had promised not to shrink away from the darkness we would encounter. After our first year of

marriage, we were worn down by the deployment, Mike's post-traumatic stress, the difficulties of graduate school, and the sense that all of these things would never end. Our second wedding felt like an opportunity for healing. For us, it was a chance to live up to the promise of our first wedding when we believed we would have a future, and a time to create a place for joy in our life together. It was a reminder not only to keep pushing through the darkness, but to look up and embrace moments of light.

On the morning of our second wedding, I woke up in the dark to the sound of rain on the roof blowing around the corners of my childhood room. My room is at the top of the stairs and juts out a little from the rest of the house, so I always hear the rain and the wind more than anyone else. I felt as though I had just fallen asleep. The previous night had been devoted to our rehearsal dinner and a flurry of last minute activities that should have been completed months ago. As I drank a quick cup of tea, my mother began marshalling all of the things that needed to make their way to the venue, an old white frame farmhouse not too far from MeeMee's. My sister Erin joined us, bleary-eyed and still plagued with jet lag. She had flown in from Vienna only ten days earlier after finishing a semester abroad. It almost felt like those early mornings when we used to scramble and scurry to get to school on time as we raced to the hotel to pick up Bridgette, and then back down the interstate to meet the rest of the

bridal party. I had ridden in my parents' front seat so many times half asleep, worried that I wouldn't do well on a test or that I needed to check my reading one last time. On that morning, I knew there were things I had left undone, but I made peace with them and shut my eyes.

We pulled into the driveway of Vantastic Hair at 7:30 and ran inside under the cover of umbrellas. While all of the other old houses on the street were still dark, the windows of Vantastic were lit up, waiting for us to come in and take over for the rest of the morning. At the top of the hill, I could see my mother's old high school and the spot where she used to park her car. Vantastic was small, with only four stations for doing hair and a lounge area in the middle with a couch and some chairs. Although I longed to take a short nap on that couch, to sink into its rich black leather folds as I had many mornings in the past, it was my job to go first to make sure that they had enough time to get everything right. While we could have gotten our hair done in Nashville, it never occurred to me to go anywhere else. Vantastic hadn't changed since I was three—it was the first place I ever had a good haircut, and the people who worked there had known me since before I had any hair. They remembered the days when I had to sit on the booster seat, as I swung my legs between snips. They met Mike on the same day that he met the rest of my extended family, and gave him a thorough once-over just like my family did. On my wedding day,

they were going to watch me transition yet again; and in the meantime, Rick, Beverly, and Billie Jo were going to do their best to give all of us the full *Steel Magnolias* experience.

My parents offered coffee and biscuits to everyone as the stylists prepared to work their magic. Soon the room was alive with conversations that I didn't need to start. I watched my best friend from high school eat breakfast with my friends from college and the Army, and at that moment, I finally felt like it was my wedding day. Rick carefully curled my hair and pinned it behind my head in a low knot, the curls draped softly over one another like a cluster of blooms. His hands moved quickly, exchanging bobby pins, hair spray, and a curling iron with dexterity as he asked about the wedding, older members of our family, and my plans for the future. He asked if I was nervous, if I was worried about the rain, but I really couldn't have cared less. If it rained through the ceremony, we would get married in the barn instead of out on the lawn. If we got soaked, we could dry off. As long as we were both alive, both present, that was all that mattered. When I emerged from his chair, I was swiftly commandeered by the make-up artist, who applied false eyelashes and dewy pigment to my skin without managing to make me look completely unlike myself. Fully made-up, I gloried in watching my mother have her hair and make-up done for the first time, though she tried to say that she didn't need it, that someone else should

take her place. As their Saturday regulars began to arrive, keeping the same standing appointments they'd had for ten or fifteen years, they smiled over us, giving us their own wedding day blessing. That afternoon, we ate lunch at Burdett's, the tea room where I poured my first dainty cup from a real teapot. Surrounded by dear friends and family, I ate chicken salad in memory of another wedding day that hadn't happened so long ago.

* * *

As we clinked glasses of champagne punch in the bridal suite, the cool sound of glass meeting glass was echoed by the click-click-whirr of the videographer's Super-8 film. Before we arrived, the suite looked like a room my grandmother might have dressed in before her wedding, with its hardwood floors, dainty white lace curtains, and soft pink-patterned rug. Photographs of brides in finery from another era hung on the walls, and the crystals on the chandelier seemed to dance overhead, as though they were excited too. We set down our luggage and dresses on brocade covered settees and chairs, quickly turning the dignified room into something that resembled a slumber party with a wide array of beautiful dress-up clothes. The girls pulled out their dresses and shoes, and a chorus of zippers, buckles, and hooks ensued, though I was instructed to wait so that they could capture the final moments of zipping up my dress on film. Although I have never been shy about getting dressed, suddenly

the request seemed odd, and I longed to shimmy into my gown as quickly as possible. However, when one is slipping into a dress with a fitted bodice and several layers of under-skirt, "quick" is never the operative word. Instead, I carefully navigated the business of getting into my dress, wondering for a brief moment why I hadn't bought something that I could get into and out of all on my own.

We bought my dress over a year ago, my mother, my sister, and I, at the first and only store I wanted to visit. My mother bought her wedding dress at Arzelle's over twenty years earlier, and as the store was still open, I was convinced that I was going to find and buy my dress there. I didn't make any other appointments, and I didn't have a back-up plan. I had designated one day and one day only for the purchase of a wedding dress. I didn't want to wait, I didn't want to see if there were more options—before I started graduate school and its endless litany of tasks, I needed to feel like something was finished. I tried on dresses that I thought I would love but I didn't, and finally asked my sister to make a few selections, trusting in the divine magic that led her to pick out almost every single formal dress I had ever worn. She brought back a dress that I never would have picked up for myself, in part because it was a strain to lift that many ruffles. As she zipped me in and I heard the organza ruffles begin to rustle against one another, I felt an urge to twirl—and I knew I had found my

dress. I didn't pick the dress that was simplest, or the one that I could easily get in and out of, though I respected Mike's request for one that didn't have a train he could trip over. Instead, I picked the dress that I knew guests would hear before they could see, a dress that made me look like a 1950s blonde magnolia.

On my wedding day, my sister fluffed my ruffled petals, and my mother set in the combs for my veil as I joyfully shouted "Please, don't anybody make me cry!" I slipped on jeweled sandals that looked like something my five-year-old self would have coveted, along with a more subdued string of Tennessee freshwater pearls that my aunt and uncle had given me for my high school graduation. Before it was time to take pictures, my MeeMee gave a timid knock on the bridal suite door. My mother led her into the room, her silvery hair fluffed to perfection to compliment her salmon pink suit, with her corsage already pinned to the lapel. She carefully looked me over, taking in my dress, my hair, and everything else in the room. Her suit matched the coral and pink flowers in the bouquets that my bridesmaids would carry, which looked almost like something I would expect to find in her garden, a mixture of roses, frothy white dahlias, soft pink snapdragons, and rosy hypernicum berries. We had discussed colors months earlier, and she couldn't have looked more like the grandmother of the bride. She tilted her head to the side and smiled, giving a quick thumbs up and a hug before getting ready to leave. I wished she would

stay longer but I knew she wouldn't—she was already telling me that I was ready to go.

* * *

Rain dripped from the eaves of the tin roof as our pastor began quoting from his favorite theologian, Doctor Seuss, proclaiming that "We are all a little weird," the subject of his homily. He admonished us to love one another, to cherish our mutual weirdness, and the life that we were building together, though there would be days when the word "cherish" would be the farthest thought from our minds. On the day of our second wedding, we said our vows three times, as we made our declaration of intent, our promises in the eyes of God and many witnesses, and slipped rings on each other's fingers. Though the words were different each time, the sentiment behind them remained the same. As Mike began repeating after the pastor, his eyes got big with the effort of trying to remember all of the words in succession. I found myself mouthing the words that I had said a few moments before, not knowing whether he saw them. Although I didn't laugh at the time—none of us did—we laughed more than once about it later. When he reached out for my ring, a tiny band of silver, our best man fumbled to untie it from its secure location. In his effort to ensure he wouldn't lose it, he had made one knot too many. Once free, it returned to the space it had occupied on my finger for the past twelve months.

In turn, I slipped Mike's ring on his finger, where it would likely remain until the next deployment. It would be too risky to wear out in the field, lest it get caught in the equipment, or provide someone with a shiny metal target. As I repeated my vows after our minister, I tried not to laugh in disbelief, occasionally looking over Mike's shoulder at the green fields, where the rain made patterns in the tall grass. Over the past two years, I had planned four weddings—two of which had come to life. In all of my planning, however, I could never envision the last time that I would say "I do." It seemed too fragile to contemplate, a brief moment that might be captured on film, but that would never happen again. Although I promised to love, honor, and keep Michael for the rest of my life three times, it still seemed like I still needed to say it once more. Our pastor reminded us on this day that there would be moments when we would not be together, but that we would always be with one another. We said "Amen," and willed it to be so. As we gave communion to each of our guests, our words became a soft refrain of bread and body, blood and wine. My cousin's honeyed voice soared in the background, encircling the space as we saw each friend, each family member who had travelled to see us on our wedding day, pressing their hands and trading smiles. We clasped our hands in front of all of them, these people who promised to love and support our marriage, as the

pastor proclaimed his final blessing. Mike tucked my arm over his, as we prepared to walk back up the aisle, finally—fully—known as husband and wife.

As my sister handed me my bouquet, and set to work straightening my dress, I glanced up at my side of the barn, catching MeeMee's eye. In the months before the deployment, while our first wedding was still a topic up for debate, I haunted the mailbox waiting for graduate school acceptances, deployment paperwork, and more news. Mike was in Louisiana, communication silent for a month as he trained yet again for desert warfare. Each day I would bundle up for the short walk to my parents' mailbox, nervous but expectant. In February, instead of finding what I expected, what I thought I needed, I found a note written in my grandmother's handwriting. I waited to open it until I made it back inside, peeling out of my layers before the welcome heat became oppressive. The card was simple, and featured one of her characteristic doodles on the front. Inside, she wrote: "I love you. I don't know what you are going to need for the next few months… But you should do whatever you need to do." I held my breath as a five-hundred dollar check fell to the floor. On the line next to purpose it read: "Love Gift."

In her wedding picture, which I chose to display with others from our family, my grandmother, Sylvia, stands next to her husband, Fred—the grandfather I never had the chance to meet. He wears a carnation pinned to his

navy suit; his pocket square and tie are in a whimsical print. She wears a white dress, a double strand of pearls, and a veiled hat, holding an orchid bouquet in one hand, his arm in another. The silver notches of her watchband glint, and they both look at the camera with shy, half-smiles, each looking secretly pleased at the prospect of spending forever together. They had known each other since grade school, their family farms only minutes away from one another. Under the trees at Oak Grove Church, the same place my parents would say their vows thirty years later, they could only imagine their future, what their shared life might look like. I know now that they dreamed of owning their own land and having a family, but I have no doubt that widowhood at forty-nine never fit into Sylvia's plans at all. In their wedding picture, however, forty-nine doesn't exist yet—they just glow.

As we prepared to leave the barn, someone passed Mike a large white umbrella, the same one my father might have carried as he brought me to the altar. The ruffles on my dress cupped the rain, trapping it for a moment before it slid to the ground. We set our sights on the groom's cottage, and a moment of peace before the reception would begin. Although it was the second time we had been declared husband and wife, it was as though we had heard those words for the first time.

* * *

I woke up the morning after our second wedding to the smell of coffee and the sensation of bobby pins needling my scalp. I reached back my hand and felt a cascade of curls, still firmly pinned in place. When I fluttered my eyes open they felt heavy, and I realized I was still wearing the false lashes from the night before. They ruffled my glasses as I checked the time, and noticed the stack of saltines still on my parents' coffee table, along with a small glass of Coke and ice chips that had melted. Mike stirred, shifting his neck uncomfortably as he began to realize the consequences of sleeping upright on my parents' couch. My mother never made it out of her wedding finery—after everything that had happened, she fell asleep in her chair still wearing her party dress. My sister was likewise passed out on the loveseat. On our wedding night, my father was the only one who ever made it up to bed. He smiled and waved good morning as he poured his first cup of the day, and I shuffled toward the teapot to heat some water.

I tried not to look at the kitchen counters, which were covered with remnants of the night before. The four layers of our wedding cake were in boxes, still surrounded by roses in every imaginable shade of pink, coral, and peach, and Mike's chocolate groom's cake sat next to them. My dress and veil were already upstairs, tucked away and out of sight, but pictures, table numbers, and the suitcases we were supposed to take to our hotel still sat near the kitchen

table. As my mother woke up and changed, she moved to start clearing things up, loading the dishwasher and moving boxes. I held her hand and we went to the living room instead, wavering in a place between shock, relief, and exhaustion. When we dreamed up this second wedding, I hadn't really thought about what I wanted to feel afterward. I had mostly counted on what I knew I wanted to remember—dances with my family, pictures that future generations could look at, laughing over the change in styles and the way that people changed (or didn't change) as they got older, as I had with my own parents' wedding photos, and a sense of closure to the year before.

As I held my mug, its warmth radiating through my fingers reminding me that I was still here, I couldn't tell whether I had any of those things at all. I remembered Mike's sister, running through the porch with her hands flailing, tears smudging her mascara, before cupping her hands to whisper in her mother's ear. Whispering didn't do any good, not with a face like that. We both knew at once that Mike's grandmother was dead, and felt grief slip down our throats, sitting in our stomachs, coiling and releasing slowly. Mike turned to me with disbelief, unable to fully comprehend what was happening as his family took him away to the groom's cottage for a conclave. An hour passed quickly, and the time after that is like small snapshots strung together, dangling in a dark space. We walked to the porch in a daze, clutching white knuckled hands,

thanking our guests and inviting them in to dinner. I smiled, and I didn't smile. A part of me was there, present with the guests that I loved, that I had so looked forward to, but a part of me was gone. At the sweetheart table, we pushed food around on our plates, not speaking except to encourage each other to eat. We needed to make a plan, we had been told to celebrate.

Although the air had cooled from the rain, I felt a wave of color rise to my face followed by a chill. I knew that I had to leave, had to be somewhere where I didn't have to celebrate any more. I caught my sister's eye, then her arm, and we made our way to the bridal suite hoping that we looked like any sister and her maid-of-honor on a wedding day. Our act must have been pretty good—we were stopped for pictures along the way. We closed the door to the suite, dropping our flowers in the vases that we'd left only a few hours earlier. My sister's hands moved quickly, unzipping my dress, lifting it quickly, as I breathed unevenly and tried to stay calm. I shed petals and ruffles, shaking and standing still. Panic attacks are tricky things. They lurk in unassuming places: a glance, a smell, a sensation, a detail you overlooked, a story you didn't want to hear. Even though I was out of my dress, even though I was surrounded by cool tile, I was tied in knots, unable to breathe or make a sound. The world had come in too close, and every sensation hurt. Over the past year, I had consumed grief and its aftermath, feeling it coat and encircle my body in a fine shroud of pain. I

released them all on our wedding day, alone in a bathroom and gasping, in the same bridal suite where I had put on my dress only hours before. I heaved up death after death, every bad thing that had ever happened, everything I had put away for an unspecified time known as "later." As I sat on the floor, I realized that what I had wanted all along was just one day that death didn't touch, a beginning that wasn't compromised by fears of the future, or the mourning that might follow. I wanted a beginning free of shadows. I couldn't cry, but I could feel it all.

I heard the band begin to play, and looked out the window. I could see the strings of lights swaying, and mouthed the lyrics softly to myself. Then I heard the whispers at the door, which my sister guarded with cool ferocity, only allowing in people she deemed trustworthy. The rest she turned away with a clipped "No" and a pursed mouth.

Is she alright? What happened?

Where's that sister of his? You just give her to me, and I'll explain how we handle things here. Imagine, doing that at your own brother's wedding. People may die, but you just don't go telling the bride.

Is she really going to stay in there all night? You just let me go in and talk to her.

Can you believe those people? All that fuss and hand waving, and now they're the only ones out on that dance floor, cutting a rug.

She needs to get over herself and get on with it. She's ruining Mike's whole wedding day.

Mike hurried between the bridal suite and the reception, trying to soothe guests and play the host while organizing the logistics of a swift getaway. As I came out to sit in the bridal suite, surrounded by bridesmaids and praying that the venue wasn't too attached to their enamel trashcan, I felt like I was five, remembering the Christmas that I came down with the stomach flu at my aunt's house. As I curled up on her bathroom floor I remember being in pain from the illness, but in even more pain over the embarrassment of it all. I just wanted to go home. Family and friends began to leave, uncertain what to do at a wedding where the bride and groom were noticeably absent, though our bridal party stayed as a kind of honor guard, unwilling to leave us without the support we were eventually going to need.

Empty and spent, I looked at my dress on the floor and knew I wasn't going to be able to put it back on. I couldn't bear the weight of it, couldn't stand the idea of anything touching me. I eyed my getaway dress on its hanger and smacked my hands in frustration—I couldn't stand this being the last memory of our wedding even more. I couldn't stand the idea of letting them win. My mother, sister, and bridesmaids helped me get dressed once more, holding me steady as the zippers and clasps were fastened. My sister fluffed the ruffles at

my shoulders, and made sure that the cinnamon-striped seersucker fabric was lying smoothly. They held my hands, found Mike outside, and formed a small wall around us as we made our way to the dance floor. Although I couldn't see it, as I was focusing only on the path ahead, Josh waved his arms in the air, signaling our friends to circle the wagons. As we made our way to the dance floor, Mike's family moved to their seats. Some of them remained there for the rest of the night. The band leader smiled and clapped his hands, signaling that they should play something suited for a first dance. As we swayed gently to the music, I laid my head on Mike's shoulder remembering a dance in his apartment kitchen, the first night that we were husband and wife.

As I drank my tea the next morning, I remembered the dance I shared with my Dad, and smiled to think that the band somehow chose a song that we listened to when we washed cars together, rather than typical sentimental father-daughter dance fare. I remembered dancing with my mother, twirling with my sister, and being surrounded by friends who would not let anything else hurt us that night. In our driveway, the best man applauded my mother for being classy, though he told her if she ever wanted lessons in being mean to people who could use it, he would teach her his best New Jersey smack talk. In the days to come, I would replay these scenes over and over again, drawing comfort from them as we flew back to Oklahoma, where we would get to live together for two weeks

while Mike resumed training. I tried to remember the good moments, the friends and family who loved us enough to give the best of themselves, as we received phone calls and accusations from Mike's parents, who said he just didn't care enough about their family any more, that they were ashamed to call him their son.

On that morning after our second wedding, I'm glad I didn't know what was to come. Instead, I answered the phone when it rang, answered a tentative "yes" when a friend asked if my parents were still hosting brunch at their house, and signaled to my mother that we had better start making biscuits. That morning we cut our wedding cake after our friends rearranged some flowers on a smaller layer, displaying it on one of my mother's pink cake plates. My sister gave her maid-of-honor toast while still wearing her pajamas, my father toasted with a cup of coffee, and the best man kept us laughing, looking more put together than the rest of us after a late night. The groomsmen all took shots of bourbon my father received from his brothers, his gift for being father of the bride, even though it still wasn't yet noon. I wore my veil all morning as friends came to the house when they could, some on their way to the airport, others as a stop before a long trip home. My mother took casual pictures of us in the backyard, giving us back some of the pictures we didn't have the chance to take. We ate layers from our wedding cakes all day long, justifying that the variety of

fruit flavors meant we were hitting important food groups. The last thing I remember is delivering cake to all of my parents' neighbors, one slice from each layer, while my wedding veil floated behind me, caught in the wind.

* * *

On the anniversary of our second wedding, I tried my best to only remember the good moments, though the pain that followed the rest of that year still lingered. Finally awake and still unwilling to admit that he needed to pack, Mike held me on the couch as we discussed our plans to eat our anniversary red velvet cupcakes over the phone that night. Although we had originally intended to try a slice of our actual red velvet anniversary cake layer, it was still at home in my parents' freezer and probably wouldn't have travelled well anyway. A year ago I had been anguished at the thought that our last wedding might end in defeat. What I didn't know then was that we had lots of weddings in our future, though none of them involved wearing a veil. We had weddings in the kitchen, in public, in our offices, and over the phone. Every time we fought and came back together, every time we chose each other and the family we created, it was as though we restated our vows, reclaiming the person we promised to be for each other. I didn't know where we would move next, or what else life might bring, but I knew there would still be weddings.

CHAPTER 3: BOOTS

I.

In the two years that we have been married, both in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of our community, Mike and I have argued over very few things. We try to keep our fights to a minimum, a holdover from the deployment when we didn't want to waste precious moments of a good Skype connection with pointless arguing. If we had to fight, we did it succinctly and without any parting shots, just in case that conversation was our last. Since we have shared and built a home together, our fights have remained that way with a few exceptions. He does not appreciate my tendency to freeze him out when I am upset, rather than talking things out—I prefer to freeze until I decide it's time to thaw. I cannot stand it when he brings his Army Captain role home, making unilateral decisions in the name of expediency—he tries to leave that self at work as much as humanly possible. To live with another person successfully, you have to build a level of tolerance toward behaviors that, while irritating, are not worthy of pitching a fit. After two years of deliberation and many a tripping incident, I have decided that Mike's boots belong in that category.

On any given day, there are at least three pairs of Army Combat Uniform boots stowed around our house—and those are only the three that I am supposed to know about. My husband still won't tell me where the two that survived Iraq are hidden, afraid that I might call a moratorium on boot purchases until their numbers dwindle. He claims an emotional attachment to them—to the fact that they are still here. When he talks about them, he gets a soft, faraway look on his face, as though he's remembering an old friend. If I ever found them, I often wonder what they could tell me, what he's forgotten or keeps locked away. They have seen, smelled, and sensed a part of his life that I will never be able to access, a part of his life that I will never be able to understand, though I see traces of it more often than he would like.

The official set of three sit in corners, in boxes, in bins, and very rarely, in closets. I have tried to place them in storage baskets to no avail—they move and have a life of their own. Their sand colored toes point toward the wall, toward the door, their tongues slightly loosened and laces dangling, ever at the ready. They wait for feet. His feet, which slip into them at 5:30 each morning while I am still trying to fall back asleep, and my feet—which always seem to stumble over them when I least expect it. No matter how smooth and soft their leather surfaces look, they sting on contact. I used to curse over these boots, and, admittedly, sometimes still do when I stub my toe or count them all at once,

wondering how I married a man with more pairs of boots than what I currently have in our shared closet. In these moments when I feel most ready to scream with frustration, however, I find myself plagued by deployment guilt, which has not entirely receded though that first deployment is long over. It's the guilt that keeps me from ending a phone call in the middle of a fight, demanding that I swallow my anger a few seconds before I am ready. It's the guilt that shadows our knowledge that this job in South Carolina will mean two whole years without a deployment, something that other families cannot count on. Guilt and fear remind me that I waited on those boots for six anxious months, and hoped I would have the opportunity to see them—all of them—again.

II.

As a child, I liked to wear my father's nice cowboy boots, the ones that he kept in his closet and shined up every Sunday before his week on the road for work would begin. These were his Work Boots, meant for the work that he did on the road as a salesman. His old, work-a-day boots lived in the garage at the bottom of the stairs. They were made of faded brown leather, with light tooling up the sides, and had a slight heel as all cowboy boots do, but they never tempted me. I knew where those boots had been. He would slip them off before coming up the stairs, knowing that mom wouldn't like grass and dirt from yard

work all over her floor—or, worse still, something he might track in from taking me to my weekly horseback riding lessons on Saturday morning.

Dad bought his first pair of boots while he was still a child. As the youngest of six brothers and sisters who were raised on a working farm, any money he earned went toward necessities rather than things he might want. However, as Dad likes to tell it, his wants were few—he had a Palomino pony named Star, could check out books about cowboys from the library, and most of his time was spent outside rather than worrying over school. As an adult, his weeks were mostly spent in the car, as he traveled across the entire Southeast, covering hundreds of miles between Monday morning and Friday evening. He cursed over the invention of the cell phone, though he dearly loves to talk, and cursed even more over the expense reports and paperwork he had to submit every week via email. After a week on the road accompanied by a duffel bag and clothes painstakingly ironed by my mother, he found his childhood self again in a Western saddle as I took my riding lessons on Saturday mornings. Regardless of the weather, we would both circle the ring on our respective mounts, though we always had different goals in mind. Dad waited all week to take a fast horse out and race around the ring, riding tall with his heels down. I studied the jumps in the center of the ring and tested my metal by seeing how

high I could go, before an accident made the complexities of dressage seem like a more appealing option.

On the way home, we would stop for hot chocolate or a cold drink, depending on the season. In the backseat, my sister Erin would often sleep, worn out by the early morning after a week spent at school. Dad would use the time to tell stories—stories of his work week spent looking over fields and golf courses, or stories of his own childhood riding adventures, depending on what direction the lesson had taken. In the summer, we arrived home dirty, covered in horse hair, sweat, and the scent of fly spray, breaking quickly for the showers. In the afternoon, Dad would take out his Work Boots, and shine their soft burgundy-brown leather until I could see a sharp reflection from the overhead light in their surface. The smell of shoe polish filled the kitchen as he sat in the table, boot in hand, rubbing a soft white cloth with polish over the tip of the toe, around the ankle, and up the sides.

While they dried by the refrigerator, helped along by the vent underneath, he helped my mom polish mine and my sister's tennis shoes, covering each scuff and scrape with a dollop of white polish. She washed the shoe laces and strung them back through their holes when he was finished. By Sunday night, there were three polished sets of shoes ready to meet the week. On Monday morning, he slipped his boots on, loaded his company vehicle, and set out on the road for

another week of sales. I loaded my backpack with homework, put on my shoes in the car, and talked to him each night, always wanting to know what he had for dinner. We would compare plates, flavors, and notes from our day over the phone until he was back home again.

III.

Boots, like most things in the military, are regulated. When we started dating, my husband had his choice of three Battle Dress Uniform boots. At the time, I was too interested in getting to know him to check whether or not he had all three—now I wonder if his boot hoarding tendencies reach further back than I imagined. As a graduate of Army Airborne School, he more than likely had a pair of jump boots, the chosen footwear for most who jumped out of perfectly good airplanes at the behest of their leadership. They were the easiest to shine, and had a toe that almost looked like glass after the vigorous application of shoe polish and determined effort. Although their ease in polishing probably came from the fact that their leather wasn't as porous, I always thought it was because my husband was an expert in boot maintenance. When we met, I was almost ashamed by the fact that his footwear was better looking than mine.

In the floor of his dorm room closet, he probably also had a pair of jungle boots, though he had never been to a jungle before in his life. They look nowhere near as exotic as they sound, though as a girlfriend of only two or three months, I

had no way of knowing that at the time. Jungle boots earned their name due to their webbing on the sides—the ventilation allowed for some air flow during warmer summer months or a deployment in an uncomfortably hot part of the world. Mike says he liked them because they were lighter, and because the webbing meant there was significantly less leather to polish. However, the boots I recall more often than not are the heavy clunkers, the older Basic Dress Uniform (BDU) boots he was issued at age eighteen in Basic Training. The laces rose up from the toe until they reached mid-shin, forming a kind of leather and lace corset on the foot. The delicacy of the diamond shape that the laces made was belied by the heavy rounded toe of the boot. Those boots made stubbing your toe on an ACU feel like a whisper in comparison. I remember thinking that if they hurt that much to walk into, I couldn't imagine how painful they might feel after walking in them for a couple of days on a ruck march.

IV.

In the many homes Mike has lived in and the one that we now share together, I am always surprised to see what I once thought were olive drab friendship bracelets sitting on the dresser. Now a few years wiser, I am aware that they are boot blousers, though they still seem like an odd accessory for the army to choose. The elastic, army green cord contains many strands, twisted like a small rope you might see on a ship, ending in two tiny silver hooks that clutch

at one another. Sometimes I find the older ones unfastened, lurking like bottle-green worms in drawers, the clasps read to catch on unsuspecting fingers. Army regulations specify, among many things, that the bottom of one's pants cannot show. They must either be tucked into boots, where they may wriggle out if laces loosen, or be properly bloused, so that the pants leg tucks under the hooked boot blouse—the equivalent of a tactical garter. While the newer ACU uniform does not require boot blousers to look put together, the BDU uniform always looked a bit more orderly and professional when boot blousers were in place. Granted, those uniforms also had to be properly ironed each day, whereas ACUs are wash and wear, the closest a soldier can come to wearing pajamas to work, no matter which corner of the world he or she is in. I often wonder how they handled those ironing regulations in the Gulf War—I can't quite picture Mike wielding an iron in Iraq.

V.

We had only been dating for two months when Mike had to go on his first night jump. When he told me that he couldn't make plans for the weekend—that he would instead be jumping out of an airplane—I had a moment of pause. I wondered if I could date someone who considered jumping out of a plane normal fare for a Saturday night. He said it so casually, as though he was going to a football game or a drive-through restaurant, two locations that seemed much

more suited to a college student. I looked at my shoes and said something about wishing him luck, not knowing what else someone in my position should say. They don't really make a manual for Army girlfriends that covers this sort of thing. He left early that morning to put in his requisite time for his Army Reserve drill weekend at Fort Jackson. Over time, I learned to plan on and schedule around drill every few weeks until he was finally placed under contract by University of South Carolina's ROTC program. I sat at my desk and tried to work on reading responses for my freshman English Composition course, thumbing through pages and looking at my phone though I knew he wouldn't be able to call.

As I sat in the safe confines of my dorm room, I recalled his stories about jump school and his desire not to be the first one off the plane. Somehow, he explained to me, it's easier to jump once you hook in your 'chute and know you are following the next guy out. When there's no next guy in front of you, then you have the opportunity to really think about the fact that you are jumping out of a plane. To me, it made sense that jumping out of a plane was an act best pursued without too much forethought—I just couldn't imagine how one could reach such a state. In movies, when they show jump scenes, they usually pan each character's face and show a line of boots, some tapping the floor of the plane, others stretched out, just waiting for the call. I wasn't sure if he was a

tapper or a relaxer, but I knew which one I was. I tapped my feet, circled my dorm room, and took a hall-mate up on her suggestion to have a drink. Later that evening I recall leaving a slightly incoherent but very well intentioned voicemail on Mike's phone, requesting that he not die, and please call me immediately after jumping out of his perfectly good airplane. When he did call, I had a headache. When he said that he was slightly injured, having rolled his left side in a trench upon landing just a little too close to the runway, something inside me hurt—and it had nothing to do with my head.

VI.

On our second wedding day as we walked alone together after our ceremony, I looked down at our fingers, each one woven in between the other, and thought of what could have been our last walk together. The June sun in Kansas is merciless. Its heat was unlike anything I had ever experienced, though I was raised to bear the sticky oppression of Southern summers. There were no trees to hide under, and my throat was dry. Those who were coming up on their second, third, or fourth deployment joked that it was a mild day, summer on training wheels compared to Iraq. We dropped off his bags and picked up his weapon, it hung on his left shoulder as we walked around the deployment site. We went through his old office, shook hands and traded hugs with friends, and stood in front of the large fan that tried to combat the heat. Doors opened and

closed rapidly as soldiers came in for one last thing, their boots a dull murmur on tile floors, only to leave a few moments later. We must have circled the building three or four times, each time I wondered if it would be the last.

There wasn't going to be a large ceremony this time, a formation for those left behind to witness. Instead, the soldiers crept down the hill a few at a time, where they passed through a chain-link fence that bore the sign "RESTRICTED AREA." Families crowded past the fence for as long as they could, sitting on plastic chairs and bags that were still waiting to be stowed. He wouldn't ask me to leave—I'm not sure if he could. Instead, he walked me back up the hill, where we watched others say goodbye, and then joined their ranks. I stalled for time, claiming that I needed to ask one more question, that he needed one more bottle of water. I think I tried to hydrate him for the next year in about an hour. When the time came, it was over so quickly that I stood, stunned, wondering if it had even happened at all. He passed through the gate and for a moment I thought I could still see him. Seconds later he blended in with the other uniforms as they entered the warehouse-like building for one final inspection. They stood shoulder to shoulder in straight lines, identical from a distance from their tan boots to their ACU patrol caps. He promised that he would find a way to say goodbye, but told me I could leave if the wait got too bad. I looked for a tree and found only small saplings, struggling like I was. Kim, our Family Readiness

Group leader moved along the hillside, offering tissues to families with one hand, holding her young son on her hip with the other. In tears, a woman next to me asked if they would be able to come back one more time, that her husband had promised he would come back. I couldn't say anything to help her, or to help myself.

An hour passed, and I perched on a picnic table with a few friends, and watched the busses line up. Their exhaust filled the air, and their idling engines added to the heat, waiting for the first troops to board. It was almost ridiculous—the sliding glass windows and familiar shape made them look as though they were buses to summer camp rather than Iraq. I received a quick text on my phone to be on the lookout, that they were coming. I quickly moved from the shade I'd found and the friends that remained, back to the hill. I looked down and waited, scanning quickly to see some kind of sign, even though I didn't even know what I was looking for. Behind the third bus, two soldiers moved forward and raised their hands, waving. I looked beside me, and saw another soldier's girlfriend, her arm raised and waving. She whispered, "It's them." I squinted, trying to make sure one of them was mine, and waved back. We waved until they boarded the busses, though Mike sent one last wave from the door. I waved for the last time, our hands signaling "I do," "I will (come home)."

VIII.

One year after our official wedding in front of our family and friends, we prepared for another departure. After a celebratory anniversary brunch at a nice restaurant, Mike would be leaving for the rest of the summer for a five week course in Virginia Beach. He had not packed his bags the night before, preferring to wait until the last minute as is his habit. Since his deployment, packing for trips sometimes makes him a little nervous, sending shivers up his spine that he can't quite explain though he feels them quite clearly. An expert packer myself, I couldn't watch him get ready, but I also found that I couldn't sit still any longer. Instead, I circled the house, lining up pictures to hang on the walls before he left. I stacked up the tin ceiling tiles we had bought in Charleston as an anniversary gift to ourselves just a month earlier, prints that references our home states of Tennessee and Wisconsin, engravings that I had brought back from a trip to Germany, and pictures from our wedding just a year earlier. I knew that once he got home, the school year and work would start up again, and we'd be packing those pictures for our next move without ever hanging them in our house in South Carolina.

Still plagued with nervous energy, I cleaned the surfaces in the kitchen, tidied up the living room, and watered the few plants that had refused to die despite our house's dry climate. After many years of practice, I knew it was far

less depressing to spend time alone in a house that was clean and presentable. At least that way I wouldn't feel quite so much like I was wallowing while I sat on the couch, covered in a blanket for comfort as I ate my dinner and watched something familiar on television. Having a clean house also meant I could invite someone else over if the mood took me, though most of my friends from graduate school were still traveling, enjoying the brief taste of freedom before teaching and classes began in August.

The last of my busy work complete, I got dressed for our anniversary, and noticed that his final bag was packed—he was ready to load up the Jeep, another thing I didn't want to watch. Instead, I decided to read the newspaper online, a habit I picked up while living in Germany when my students and colleagues expected for me to be an expert on news from the American perspective. I scrolled through the opening headlines on my *New York Times* homepage until an image and ten words forced me to stop: "Sixteen More Killed by Wave of Bombings in Iraq," the cover story for news from the Middle East. From the comfort of my living room, clad in a soft red crochet dress that I bought because it twirled beautifully, I could not look away from the child in the foreground, who must have been around twelve or thirteen. He stared at the blood-soaked clay tiles in front of the coffee shop, arms crossed, his faded salmon and blue slip-on shoes only inches from the aftermath. On Friday, before the suicide

bomber appeared, the café was open for business, crowded with conversation and cups of something warm. On Sunday morning, thirty-nine people were dead, and the siding wall of the shop was dented, blown back and discolored from the blast. Chairs and a lone table were scattered on the sidewalk, a blue and white woven cloth mingled with shrapnel, dirt, and blood. I couldn't tell what disturbed me more—the blood on the floor, the thirty-nine lost, the fact that thirty-nine was only the death toll from this attack when there had been at least two others within forty-eight hours, or the look on the boy's face, which seemed to suggest, "Again" in a way that was equal parts disgust and acceptance.

Mike knew Kirkuk, he had been stationed nearby, and had spent time outside the wire. I wondered if he had ever seen that coffee shop, or a scene like the one that had left me frozen, even from thousands of miles away. Every year it seems like I find out another small detail about his deployment, something that he couldn't share at the time or that he had momentarily forgotten. Like the people in Iraq who just disappeared, taken in the night for trying to work against the terrorists. Or the people who were held for ransom, in an effort to gain more funds while subduing the local population. These details, which became so much a part of his normal work life, but that never entered into our conversations, moments when he stopped thinking about his job, and tried to remember the good parts, the funny bits, that wouldn't drive me crazy. I

wondered how many children he saw with that same look on their face, how many more there would be before any lasting peace would arrive. Mike called for me to get my shoes. I grabbed a sweater, chilled, and we hurried out the door.

IX.

In past wars, the phrase "boots on the ground" has typically been used to justify the need for a direct physical presence in-country. For the mission to be successful, generals and politicians demanded boots: old boots, fresh from boot camp boots, all were welcome, all were needed. For the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the meaning behind this phrase has evolved. While it still refers to a need for ground presence, for soldiers and their families it also means the length of time someone will be in theater—the duration of time their boots will be on the ground. Boots on the ground time for a deployment has changed over the past ten years, ranging from a year, to eighteen months at its apex, followed by a drawdown to fifteen months, and six to twelve months at the most recent count.

As reports regarding Syria's status filled the news, complete with countdowns and remonstrations regarding a "red line," we were placed on recall. I had never been married or even dated as a crisis began. I only knew what happened once a crisis was in full swing, once it could be defined as a

specific fight against someone or something, once it had a name with a corresponding award that veterans would later pin on their uniforms. Even in wars that are already well established, soldiers and spouses are cautioned not to get too concerned until final orders are cut, until it's time to really leave. In the autumn of 2013, I felt incapable of deciding how concerned I needed to be, how concerned I had a right to be. Mike explained that being on recall meant if he received a phone call from work, he needed to be close enough to be back at the office within a specified time limit. I asked what that meant, and he was puzzled by my confusion. I stated more clearly, "Does that mean you will be coming back, or could you just have to leave?"

My questions showed both my ignorance and my fear, but at that point I didn't really care. Mike carefully reminded me that he hadn't been told to pack a go-bag—he would still need to come home if he needed to go somewhere overseas that required gear. When I asked if he knew when he'd get to leave, however, his answers became less specific. He would leave when the job was done. I watched the news, cursing at politicians who deemed diplomacy a sign of weakness. They wore slick suits, sharp ties, and shiny flag pins that glinted for the camera. Some of them took pocket sized copies of the Constitution out of their pockets, determined to show their commitment to the founding fathers. Others praised the brave men and women who had already sacrificed their lives

in a breath from the comfort of news studios, taking a sip of water before proposing that we send more troops as soon as possible, whether we had a clear strategy or not. It seemed as though they were speaking about plastic GI Joe toys that could be scattered across a map, not real people that I might know, people who would have to live with the consequences of their decisions. I watched cities crumble while refugees came out of the ruins, stunned by their new reality. They didn't need a red line to tell them that life would never be the same again—that life hadn't been the same for a long time, it's just that the rest of us were late in noticing. Boots waited on the ground, in the air, and on carriers in the water. We waited too, holding our collective breaths.

X.

I sat in the main waiting room at Moncrief Army Community Hospital, ushered there by the receptionist who was displeased that I was sitting in a section clearly marked "for men only" while Mike had his shoulders scrutinized by the MRI machine one more time. He'd had problems with his shoulders as long as I had known him, but they had gotten worse after the deployment. Moments earlier as I sat accompanied by my husband, it wasn't a problem—I made polite conversation with the other men in line waiting for X-Rays and MRIs, and didn't see anything that wasn't carefully covered by gym shorts or a hospital gown. Now that I was on my own, however, unaccompanied by my

husband and the Captain's bars he wore, I was in the wrong place. The room was filled with Basic Training privates, some clearly bearing injuries, others in good health but obliged to accompany their battle buddy as they waited to be seen by a doctor. Two boys went back to the appointment rooms, along with a young mother and her daughter. The girl sitting across from me shifted, uncomfortable after a few hours of waiting. Her left jaw was swollen, as though she had secreted a golf ball in her cheek, and she leaned back, using the wall as a temporary brace. Every few minutes the Drill Sergeant walked through, his boots making wide strides through the aisles. As he walked, he nudged the privates, reminding them to keep military bearing as they waited. He then took his post back at the receptionist's desk, chatting about her plans for the weekend.

I wished I had some kind of over the counter pain reliever that I could give the girl—she didn't look that much older than my sister, Erin, who was beginning her senior year of college only ten minutes away. Even if I had it, however, I knew I couldn't give her anything. Only the Army doctors are allowed to give medication to the privates, and I didn't want to add to her load. Instead, I asked if she had received any ice since she'd been there, something to dull the pain. She shook her head slowly, and said she'd just been told to sit. She was afraid to ask for anything else. I tapped my feet on the floor, unable to tell what I found more irritating—the fact that she had been sitting there for

nearly five hours, or the fact that no one thought she needed ice. "You go ask them for some ice, and if they don't give it to you, I'll go find some myself." Ten minutes later she returned to her seat, ice bag in hand, after being told to run down to the hospital shop to fetch a bag.

A mid-morning talk show played on a wall-mounted television, and the privates craned their necks to see what Ellen would do next. As they waited, as we waited, the Drill Sergeant's voice occasionally overpowered the TV volume. "It's these girls, you know? They ain't used to running every day at home, they get injured. They're used to wearing high heels, going out to the clubs, and they just can't keep up on the run." I whipped my head around, building up steam. In a military climate already under scrutiny for sexual assault and discrimination, the very idea that a Drill Sergeant would blatantly toss around sexist comments in front of his trainees was unthinkable. I was going to eviscerate him, calmly, icily, but I was going to let him know that his remarks were unhelpful, unappreciated, and out of keeping with his position. I moved to stand, but I couldn't. I couldn't envision a scenario where I could have that conversation without calling him an ass. And while I might make that move on my own out in the world off post, I froze, realizing that I didn't know what I had the right to say as a military spouse.

Although we had only been married two years, and I had seen the Army world as a girlfriend and fiancée for five years before that, I knew I was treading on dangerous ground. On the bases I had visited before, I had heard stories about wives who were "that spouse"—the ones who couldn't begin a sentence without mentioning their husband's rank, or the ones who could always be counted on for complaints when training went late. I had seen the internet memes that mocked the "dependapotamus," someone's clever co-mingling of the words "dependent," the official Army term for spouses and children, and "hippopotamus." Although nearly every spouse I had met so far had treated me with kindness, I was already aware of the unspoken rules that a spouse must follow, which range in subject matter from the correct dress to wear to a formal military function (floor length preferable, do not show too much skin, do not wear something that is not body conscious, do not display tattoos) to the importance of not detracting from the mission (save your complaints for other spouses, try to be understanding when plans change, realize that the changes have nothing to do with you).

These rules are balanced, however, with the knowledge that if you need something, someone will help you. If you are lonely, frustrated, or confused you have someone to call who will immediately understand. If you need someone to help with childcare, or you don't want to eat another meal by yourself, you have

friends to call on. If you are new in town and don't know anyone else, you can meet other spouses and forge swift friendships, the happy byproduct of individuals who have agreed to uproot their lives on a regular basis. I knew how to balance these rules when interacting with other spouses, but for the first time, I was thinking about challenging someone outside my circle and I felt powerless. How could I invoke the knowledge that the Drill Sergeant shouldn't be making those comments without establishing my credibility, which suddenly felt entirely tied to my husband and his rank? My frustrated claims about sexism and poor leadership felt as ineffectual as the sitcom mother who scolds her child and then says "Just wait until your father gets home!" I felt "dependent" in every sense of the word as I waited for Mike to come back out, hoping that the Drill Sergeant would still be lounging at the front desk. I later learned that the correct protocol was to get the Drill Sergeant's name and fill out an Interactive Customer Evaluation (ICE) Complaint, noting the details of the alleged infraction. I found myself wishing I had at least tried to speak up, even if it did mean calling him an ass.

XI.

Boots, like battle tactics, are subject to change. Although the military has stockpiled tan boots since the Gulf War, prior to 2004 the Tans were an exception, rather than the rule. With the shift in tactical focus to an environment

in which sand colored surfaces comprise the majority of a soldier's surroundings, the BDU uniform and its corresponding black boots no longer seemed mission appropriate. New soldiers in basic training do not receive the same admonitions regarding proper boot polishing that my husband once did. Instead, they pull on tan leather boots that may eventually acquire a sand-soaked patina from days spent in the Middle East. Like their predecessors, these boots must still have laces—zippers would be too loud, too casual, too shiny. They might imply feet less than ready for a mission, or feet more than ready to become a target. Although some soldiers embrace the option to wear short boots, this is an option best reserved for those over six feet tall—otherwise, you tend to look like you are standing in a tan-colored bucket.

Boots in combat come in many forms. There are the "hurry up and wait" boots that linger on post, waiting for the last wave goodbye before the deployment actually begins. These are accompanied soon after by "hurry up and wait" boots in country—waiting on the FOB, the military Forward Operating Base, until orders come in to move elsewhere, a place where things are happening, and feet need to be prepared to hurry. There are also boots in transit, the boots that never seem to come up when headlines proclaim that "All troops will be home by Christmas." "All" is a very subjective word depending on which boots you happen to be wearing—or waiting for—at the time. Boots are

exchanged quickly and without too much thought for the individuals wearing them, as a deployment to Iraq turns into one to Afghanistan seemingly overnight. Boots that were packed, prepared to move to Germany, may find their orders changed even though they've made plans and their boxes are at the ready. In this new age of Tans, there are also sitting-under-the-table boots, which tend to be accompanied by politicians' wingtips. I wonder if these boots under the table and their counterparts, who move under the watchful eye of unmanned drones, tap at the same pace, each movement signaling worry, impatience, and impending change.

XI.

Boots off for the weekend, we sat on the couch enjoying our morning routine: we ate eggs from the Farmer's Market that we had purchased the day before, and traded news stories from our morning reading. I sipped a second cup of tea, loathe to begin another round of studying and grading student papers. I was nearing the end of my second year of graduate school and feeling every bit of it. Although Mike has a computer of his own, he prefers to read books on his Kindle, looking over my shoulder every now and then if an article catches his eye or if I erupt with a particularly potent reaction to a news story. In an effort to prolong the morning, I took in multiple articles, reading bits and pieces from the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic*, a few blog entries I had missed

during the week, and a *Washington Post* article that claimed "Iraqi interpreters feel frightened and 'fooled' as U.S. visa program ends." I scrolled through the story, frustrated by the bureaucracy that may prevent countless Iraqi interpreters from receiving the benefits they were promised for their service. I read until I could not read silently any longer, and began having a dialogue with my computer screen, berating misplaced trust and broken promises. As I fumed, Mike grabbed the computer, his face suddenly ashen despite the remains of his late summer tan. "I think I know that guy… I think… I think that was our terp."

We enlarged the tiny picture to the left, and read that the young man, Ali Nori Nadir, was Sunni Kurdish interpreter in Iraq. The date in the corner read 10/16/2008, three years before Mike had been there, but the patches in the background belonged to the 1st Infantry Division, the Big Red 1—they matched the combat patch on Mike's uniforms in the closet. We craned our heads, trying to make out name tapes, comparing the background to pictures Mike had brought back to Iraq. Just because the interior of the house looked similar, that didn't necessarily mean that it was the same guy. So many of the houses looked the same. Mike paced behind the couch, hands clenched as he recalled conversations with his interpreter, also a young Kurdish man, who dreamed of moving to Colorado with his family. He loved America, he had plans and dreams, he was just biding his time until he could make them a reality.

I looked up the reporter's contact information, wondering if she could tell us more about the young man, while Mike contacted a friend who had also gone out on mission with the same interpreter. The cursor hovered at the end of the sentence, "Is this our guy?" In the picture, Nadir wears a half smile, and turns half his face toward the camera, left eyebrow raised. I didn't tell Mike, but the picture is so similar to one of his own from training that they could be cousins, each with a raised eyebrow salute. We waited for word from Mike's friend, knowing that even if he said Nadir isn't their guy, we'll never know for sure what happened to their interpreter after they left.

XII.

Since 2011, I find that my body begins to tense up during the last few weeks of October, when November seems almost close enough to touch. Some days I blame it on mid-semester woes, citing the number of papers I still need to grade. Others, I blame on allergies; South Carolina does not have an off season. As the calendar moves closer to Veteran's Day, however, I always remember, and then I must find a place to sit down. I look to see what day November 3rd falls on, and quickly try to figure out what I can do to make the day pass with as little notice as possible, holding my breath until we make it to at least two weeks later—past the memorials, Facebook statuses thanking us for our service, and parades that end when the light fades. I watch Mike carefully, wondering if this

day will pass like the one before it, or if there will be nightmares that he won't remember the next morning.

November 3, 2011 was the first time he ever saw boots make a cross.

When a soldier dies in combat, there is little time for grieving. That time is compressed into a single memorial service, which occurs roughly the same time that the family back in the States attends a memorial service on post. They make special dog tags, identical to the ones that the soldier actually wore down to the correct spelling of his or her name, and hang them from the pistol grip of a rifle, its barrel pointed nose down into the ground. A helmet sits on the buttstock of the rifle, and the boots sit at the bottom, resting beneath the dog tags that dangle overhead. The boots, helmet, and rifle aren't the actual soldier's either. Sometimes the unit has a surplus and they grab extras to make a memorial. Other times, they grab some from a soldier's bunk who is on leave—they never tell him when he gets back—or ask a fellow soldier to volunteer some of his gear. The soldier's picture is placed to the left of the boots, and the medals a soldier has earned are placed in front. On November 3, 2011, the memorial was decorated with a Combat Action Badge and a Bronze Star. Mike doesn't remember all of the service—he was in charge of putting the memorial slide show together, and has blocked out much of the rest of that day. He remembers a prayer, the commanding officer saying a few words, more statements from the

soldier's friends, and the final roll call. At roll call, they call the soldier's name three times:

Vincent.

Lt Vincent.

Lt. Dustin Vincent.

Soldiers slow-salute the memorial in groups of three, led by senior commanders who place ceremonial coins at the memorial. As they move their hands downward and prepare to right face, they must also prepare to move on—or whatever that might mean for the time being. Their boots may move, but I don't think that they carry the same weight that they did a few hours before.

In South Carolina, there were no boots, and for three days there were no calls. We were on a blackout, and this time, there was no way for Mike to try to send word that he was okay. I looked out my peephole to the decking outside my one-bedroom apartment, and wondered what would happen if the casualty notification officers tried to get in after hours. I didn't have a landline phone, and there would be no way for them to buzz in. I used to think that doorbells made a cheerful sound, as though to announce "Someone is here!" with an extra flourish. Now I cannot stand them—I've seen the pre-deployment Powerpoint presentation. A ringing doorbell during a deployment is the sign that it is over, that the only boots on the ground will be yours as you sink to the floor. Lt.

Vincent and his wife married a few days before the deployment—we could have passed one another in the courthouse, or in the halls as we tried to get me enrolled in the DEERS system, which holds the key to military healthcare and the other benefits Mike wanted me to have before he left. I sank to the ground and cried as though I knew them. I cried for the knock on the door that could have been.

XIII.

When I look around our house, the home we've shared for over a year, I often wonder what our next home will look like and when we will have to leave. In this house, mail piles up on the small sideboard, the first flat surface you can see after walking down the hall from our front door. My stacks of student papers, books to plan for classes, and workshop notes always end up on our farmhouse table first, then my office—even though my office is right off of the entry way. We're trying to get better about putting our clothes away immediately after doing our laundry, though stragglers always manage to find a home in a laundry basket near the bedroom door. They stay there for about a week, and then they shame us into hanging them up. The tea kettle in our kitchen usually sits on the top left burner, though for the life of me I cannot tell you why. The boots, however, remain wanderers, moving throughout the house as though they know our plans for the future. We've committed to moving

every two to three years, packing them and everything else we need to our next post. Each day it's as though they are preparing for that next home, trying out a new room to see if they might like that spot better in a new place. They see consistency in the inconsistencies, even when I cannot.

CHAPTER 4: DOUGH BOWL

As I waited for the dough to rise a second time, I contemplated my options. I had already survived one failure—could I survive another? Intellectually, I knew that my body *could* survive, but my dignity, however, was another story. Failure is always demoralizing, but failure at baking bread felt even more so. It felt like a failure of genetics—I had not lived up to my bread-baking potential, the bread dough had failed to recognize my kinship to a long line of women who knew how to wield a rolling pin. How could I possibly move thousands of miles away if I wasn't even capable of baking two loaves of bread?

I paced around my kitchen, my slippered feet sliding around the cool tile floors, hoping to add the energy to the air that the baker at the farmer's market assured me was essential. Initially, we had entered her stall hoping for a nice loaf of oatmeal bread. However, as we chatted, I realized that I was staring at a potential asset, someone who could help me navigate my first foray into the land of yeast and dough. As Mike opened his wallet, preparing to exchange a few dollars for a freshly baked loaf, I opened my mouth in hopes of yielding far more profit. I had been coming to this farmer's market for years, ever since my first weekend on my own in grad school. By this point, some of the vendors knew

more about my day-to-day life than my extended family. They were a part of my weekly routine, and as such we shared more than a transactional relationship. When I ventured a hesitant question about making bread, Liz favored me with a broad smile accompanied by frank advice. "The trick," she said, "is to have lots of activity in your house. People who have kids and dogs, it's no problem—the yeast pops up like that, and the dough comes together quickly."

Having neither kids nor dogs, I looked at Mike and said, "Well, we can't get a dog yet… do you think it would help or hinder the process to hire our friends' kids for the afternoon?" I was only half joking. The mere thought of projects entailing yeast was enough to send me in search of an adult-sized pillow fort. Though I had no fear of pigs' feet and made my own chicken stock in a pot of cartoon-like epic proportions, yeast was the last frontier. It was alive, and it could smell my fear. I could almost hear it laugh.

I eyed the light blue flour sack towel that covered the glass bowl, the biggest one I owned, and wondered what harm it could do to check just one more time. As a child, I could never leave the bread bowl alone, no matter how long it had been since I had last taken a peek. I would creep through the doorway of our kitchen, and tiptoe across the white linoleum floor, afraid that normal footfalls could cause the dough to collapse. Sometimes MeeMee would bring her dough bowl to the house when she was going to make bread, hauling it

in the backseat of her Bing cherry colored Buick along with her sewing machine and a few buckets of whatever was coming in from the fields on the farm. It held almost as much fascination for me as the mound of dough that would swell to twice its size cradled by its wooden frame. When it was empty, I would trace the smooth wood inside, coating my fingers with the dusty remnants of flour that were now a part of the bowl itself. When it was full, its curved interior guided my small hands in a kneading motion, though they lacked the strength and sureness that my grandmother's held. Once it was sitting on the counter to rest, nestled in a warm corner near a small pot of water set to boil, I waited as long as I could, hoping to finally catch the moment when the magic happened. No matter how cautiously I lifted the edge of the dishtowel, it always evaded me, waiting until the very moment that I became immersed in something else. Only then did the pillowy edges of the dough begin to rise, bubbles of flour, yeast, and sugar mounding on top of one another past the edges of the bowl where I waited for what would happen next.

In my own kitchen, I found my resistance even less than when I was five. Perhaps this is due in part to the size of the kitchen itself. Although it was a fair improvement over my first apartment kitchen, or almost any kitchen Mike and I had shared, it was still a size that a charitable realtor would sell as "compact." When cooking at the stove, I could stretch out my right arm and easily grab a

knife from the black countertop behind me without disturbing the contents of my pan. When Mike and I unloaded groceries, we would take turns saying, "Right behind you," and "Fair warning, the fridge door is open." Once you have knocked your head or a much-valued elbow into the fridge door, you appreciate these warnings. It was a good kitchen, but it was meant for two newlyweds at most on a good day. Though I was older and had plenty to keep me busy, I still found myself entering the kitchen with some small task in mind—refilling the pots and pans on the stove so that they wouldn't boil empty, hand-washing those dishes I never seemed to get to, or stopping for a glass of water on my way back to grading student essays. Along the way, I would inevitably end up pulling back the towel to see what lay beneath. Occasionally I would add a little bit of oil to guard against the top growing too dry. I wasn't sure what kind of problem that could cause, but I knew I'd been warned against it, so an oil-ing I would go. I waited, debating whether or not to turn on my oven to add more heat to the house.

Our rental house in Columbia, South Carolina is like my childhood home in one way and one way only: it had a tendency to run cold. Determined that this dough would not be like the last, I cranked up the oven to 200°F, and cracked the door open, just like my mother used to when I was growing up in Tennessee. That house has two floors, and my bedroom sits at the very top of the

stairs. On winter mornings, it always feels as though the insulation crew never quite finished their job in an effort to meet the final move-in deadline. My sister Erin and I would wake up each morning in the dark. Most of the time it felt as though we had just gone to bed, no doubt a consequence of staying up too late to finish homework the night before. We stumbled down the stairs, bleary-eyed, drawn by the promise of breakfast, coffee for those of us old enough to drink it, and the fear of rush hour traffic heading toward downtown Nashville if we were late. When we walked into the kitchen, our mother would already have three chairs pulled up next to the oven door, its orange coils beckoning us to come closer to its warming heat. We crowded our cold, slippered feet near the open oven door while our mother poured coffee and packed our school lunches, careful not to get too close. An early school morning was bad enough; we didn't need to try an early school morning with burnt feet. The wooden chairs squeaked as we settled in, carefully balancing white scalloped plates filled with cinnamon toast on our knees. I crunched through the layers of butter, cinnamon and sugar and contemplated whether or not to eat the crusts. My sister somehow managed to balance her plate and eat with her eyes closed, a feat I still have yet to manage. Though I hated the early hour, and still feel a sense of unprepared dread any time I have to wake up in the dark, I always considered it

a romantic way to begin the morning, likening myself to Jo and Meg from *Little Women* as they prepared to go out and make their living in the world.

As I peered under the cloth the next time, which could have been somewhere between five seconds and fifteen minutes later, I prayed to see some kind of growth, a sign that today would not be like yesterday.

* * *

By the time we reached November 2013, I had not been home to Tennessee in almost four months, my longest absence by far since I had moved back from Germany three years ago. As the school year progressed, Mike and I began talking about where we would go next. In many ways, it felt as though we had just moved in to this first house of ours. Though it was a rental, we had added pictures to its walls, hung curtains, and made feeble attempts at gardening in the late summer South Carolina heat. After just over a year, we had accumulated boxes in our garage and junk piles in our spare bedroom, just like any other homeowner. However, we knew that it was only a matter of time before we would have to leave again, or at least begin the paperwork for our next duty station. As we neared the one year mark in our home and at Mike's job, we began having The Talk every few weeks over dinner, after we were comfortably full and ensconced on the couch. Conversations that involve uprooting your life do not go well when one or both participants have an empty stomach. Low

blood sugar can lead to debates that are neither useful nor necessary. As always, we had The Talk working under the assumption that the Army still had the funds and desire to send us somewhere else, though we knew that there were no guarantees in a time of troop cuts and sequestration.

We went through our list for what felt like the tenth time that year, trying to find a sense of sureness in a situation that we knew would always be out of our control. Sometimes The Talk isn't a topic worthy of capital letters. On road trips, we would list our dream locations that we hoped the Army would send us to before retirement. However, these conversations in the living room felt much more real, more urgent—they weren't the stuff of dreams, they were plans for an impending reality. I brought up the topic this time, wondering if our lists were still the same and how our choices would line up with my grad school schedule.

> "I'm just not sure I'll be ready to leave when it's time to go… If we get news in June, we'll only have three months to get things lined up before the box brigade arrives. And that's *if* the book is finished. What are we going to do if the book isn't finished?"
>
> "I think your book will be finished. If it's not, you just focus on getting it done, and I'll be in charge of the boxes."

I snorted with laughter, remembering the last time that Mike and I packed up his apartment in Kansas together. Although he was only a month out from his

deployment, he refused to believe that we needed to pack up any items in the apartment, citing that they were necessary for daily use. Not wanting to argue, I would box a few things up at a time, making small piles in the guest bedroom while he was at work. On the last night before he deployed, we spent hours packing boxes, washing surfaces, and trying to get things lined up so that he could get his security deposit back before leaving for Iraq the next day. As I drove him to the deployment field, we still had one last load for the storage unit in the back of our rental car. There's nothing like walking back from a deployment field to a vacuum cleaner and at least three boxes you can't lift in the back seat.

Mike swore that this time would be different and my laughter at his expense was unnecessary. He promised that he would follow my system to the letter, as long as I set aside the things that I didn't want the packers to touch—he wanted no part in accidentally sending something priceless to its possible doom. Army packers are notorious for breaking and mixing things up during moves. His last movers from Oklahoma thought it was appropriate to place a lamp, a spice rack, a few extra hangers, and countless sheets of protective butcher block paper in the same box.

"But really… the important thing won't be when we move. The important thing is that we're agreed on where we move. The when will always be

up in the air. The only thing we *might* get a vote on is where. I know what I have on my list, but what's on yours?"

I wait a moment, turning my thoughts over in my head, trying to collect some kind of logic for moving closer to Tennessee. *If we're home, we'll be close to my family in case he deploys—we're over a year into dwell time and due for another one soon. I will be damned if I go through another deployment by myself like I did in South Carolina. If we're home, we'll save so many vacation days when it comes to leave around Christmas and Thanksgiving—we'll finally be able to take a vacation that doesn't necessitate a negotiation between time, sleep, and visiting as many people as possible. If we are home…* Although I knew the location I wanted to say, I swallowed and asked, "What are our options?" hoping that we'd reach the same conclusion together, a happy accident.

Mike began listing different bases in the United States and overseas, reciting them from memory with ease. We quickly nixed the idea of Korea—it was too far away from home, and it felt like too much of a language jump after grad school. Mike shuddered and eliminated Ft. Bragg, "You know they'd make me jump out of planes again… and you know how well you reacted to that the first time." I agreed. Admittedly, the last time he had jumped I was only nineteen and we had been dating for all of two months, but the idea of him jumping out of a perfectly good airplane still terrified me. With Korea and North

Carolina off the map, I countered that Ft. Drum was also a no go, citing that a winter in upstate New York might just do me in, no matter how pretty the snow would look outside. We tossed out all of the options in Texas (too hot, too large, and too many scorpions that might dwell in shoes), anything in the desert, and anywhere that didn't have a command available for a field artillery officer. At this stage in the game, Mike would have to have a command at his next duty station, or we would never be able to rise any higher.

I held out hope in my mind that Ft. Campbell would stay on the list—it is only forty minutes from my MeeMee's house, and an hour from my parents. If something were to happen, good or bad, they would all be there. But even as I hoped and wished, I knew in my gut that sometimes home is not enough. Although Fort Campbell was close to my family, I also knew from watching the local news as a child that it was also a base that deployed frequently. We might move there together, but there was no guarantee that we would be in the same country that often for the next two to three years. As a writer and a traveler, life with the Army was usually a good thing for my career. Although it meant I couldn't hold a job at a brick and mortar institution for longer than the duration of our posting, I was able to meet interesting people, and my experiences made for good writing material, which was enough—at least for right now. That being said, while being in a place of discomfort had been good for my writing in South

Carolina, I wasn't sure how much more discomfort I could handle. We had reached the point we always reached in these discussions: if we were going to stay in the Army until Mike retired, it was going to be a matter of which location would best serve his career. Hoping that my inner feminist wouldn't strike me dead, I asked him what job would help him the most, though the question sounded like something a wife from the 1950s should be asking instead.

Mike squirmed in his seat and sighed, as uncomfortable with the way the Army privileges his career as I was. He chose carefully, listing Ft. Lewis in Seattle, Ft. Stewart in Savannah, and Ft. Carson in Colorado. Although he couldn't offer me a location that would always put my career first, he tried to do the best he could to ensure I would always be able to write and make friends somewhere other than the middle of nowhere. While I always appreciate this gesture to make my career goals a priority, all I could envision was trekking all the way out to Seattle… In the rain.

In the days that followed, I found myself thinking more and more about home—not in the abstract sense, but in more concrete terms. Knowing that my own "home" may move even further away has made me want to find better ways to take it with me. Granted, my mother truly meant what she said on the phone that week, "It doesn't matter, I'll find a way to come to you wherever you go." However, I found myself plagued by a question: what happens on the days

when home can't come to you? What do you do when home is two time zones and more than one plane ride away… and there is nothing that you can do about it? As I puttered around in my kitchen, using pots, pans, bowls, and plates that we had received as wedding gifts a little over a year earlier, I wondered how much of home I could cook into my new nomadic existence. Although I have no fear when it comes to projects in the kitchen, I do not cook the things that I love to eat in my mother's and grandmother's kitchens. Somehow I have always convinced myself that it wouldn't taste the same, and that the tastes of home are best enjoyed where they are perfect, where home actually is. In many ways, my grandmother's baking—light bread, cornbread, yeast rolls, lemon pie—represents all that is home to me. A visit to her house, to her table, means that my trip home is finally complete. That afternoon, I called my mother and said, "So… I think it's time I learned to bake bread."

* * *

Like me, my grandmother learned to make bread for the first time after she was married. At her house growing up, they never had bread or rolls. Instead, they had biscuits and cornbread, which they would savor at the end of a meal, spread with butter and sorghum molasses or jelly that they had put up earlier in the year. She learned the art of roll-making from her mother-in-law, with whom she and her husband Fred lived for the entirety of their marriage, not

to mention the rest of Grandmother Borthick's life. When she tried rolls for the first time, she thought that they were one of the most wonderful things that she had ever tasted, and endeavored to make them just as well, although she hadn't grown up in the kitchen—that was her older sister's place. She, along with the other younger children, spent more time working in the fields than doing anything else. Bread-making came along even later, as she told me on the phone one evening. I had called to try to prepare myself to meet my bread challenge the best that I could, wishing I could learn to make bread in her kitchen instead. I sat on the couch, holding a legal pad on my knees, trying to write down all the words of wisdom she had to offer. "Fred's sister's sister made them the first time I ever tried them… They were great big slabs of bread, and she baked them four loaves at a time. They were just beautiful, and we all wanted to learn how to make them. But you promise, now, you won't be making any bread on a day that you have classes? You need plenty of time… You can spend a whole day messin' with that stuff."

MeeMee's warnings echoed the same ones I heard from my mother the night I told her I wanted to learn to make bread. After assuring me that she knew I could do it, that I was brave in the kitchen, she shuddered and said, "I just can't even—I've never wanted to touch the stuff after home ec. It's too hurtful when the stuff doesn't rise, or it turns out into a big mess. You have to

give yourself enough time for everything to go as planned, or for things to go a different direction. Whatever happens, just try to think about the process of it all—I know you want to get it right the first time, but don't get so caught up in wanting the first batch to be perfect." Despite her own misgivings, she agreed to call MeeMee and translate her instructions for making bread and rolls. While I was willing to call her myself to talk through anything, I had no faith that I could convince her to give me anything even approximating exact measurements. I was sure my mom would have much better luck with that—she'd been working her way through that particular challenge for years.

Although I was afraid of the yeast and what it might do—or not do—all I could think about were delicious slices of white bread on a paper towel, with butter slipping through each layer until it met my fingers underneath. As a child when I went to my MeeMee's house, bread and rolls were a part of every visit. While we waited for aunts, uncles, and cousins to arrive for supper, we would gather around the kitchen stove, talking about what had happened during the week. The air smelled of warm, earthy, yeast dough mingled with the meal that was to come. I would peek underneath pot lids and tinfoil, at carrots cooked with a pinch of sugar, creamed corn in a cast iron skillet, country fried steak surrounded by pools of gravy, and slices of tomato waiting for the table while I ate my roll, the reward for arriving early enough that you had to wait, one small

bite at a time. My father prefers his rolls unbuttered. I slice mine, the serrated knife cracking the golden crust, leaving a small scattering of crumbs on the counter. When the roll opens, steam meets my fingers, which move to separate the roll quickly, lest I get burned. Once slathered with an even layer of butter, I eat the bottom piece first, preferring to save the crunch of the top piece for last. The butter, aided by gravity, soaks through the pillowy layers of the roll until it settles at the bottom crust, darkened by its proximity to the baking pan. It tastes of salt and sweetness, light on the tongue, each bite more satisfying than the last.

Later, when we'd leave, MeeMee would send us home with a plastic shopping bag filled with the day's offerings, and cinnamon rolls if we were extra lucky. The next morning, we would eat the leftover rolls or bread toasted, and spread with whatever preserves we had on hand. This wasn't anything like the bread that my dad bought at the store, with its cheerful Sunbeam girl on the label, eating a slice of well-buttered toast. Her bread clung to the roof of my mouth when it was fresh, leaving me feeling as though I couldn't quite breathe. There was a moment of sweetness, and then nothing. Her bread wasn't real bread at all.

After she admonished me to take my time, and repeated that I should never bake bread on a school day, MeeMee told me about her own bread struggles as of late.

"Emilie, I tell you, I tried to make rolls the other day for supper, and they turned out just awful. And I don't say awful a lot, so I mean awful. They rose up beautiful, but the texture was just heavy and horrible."

"Do you think it was the yeast this time?"

"No, no, the yeast worked just fine. But make sure you get several packets, just in case. I just can't seem to find the right flour. We used to make bread and rolls with wheat flour from Orlinda. It was soft and nice, and Daddy would go take the wheat up there from the farm—it was like a wheat bank. But the flour I've been able to get for the past five or six years… It's just no good. No good at all. It's just not soft enough, and it doesn't bind right with the yeast."

* * *

Although I don't remember going up to Orlinda to buy flour, I do remember carrying it by the sack-full back to Nashville every time we visited Springfield. By the time I came along, my grandfather Fred had been dead for eight years, and with him the agreement to mill his wheat on deposit. However, the Orlinda Milling Company still produced flour made from local Robertson County wheat, so my mother still bought her flour in the local stores at Springfield even though it was a forty minute drive from our home in Nashville. Flour, as I learned later, tastes and works differently in different parts of the

country depending on where the wheat itself is grown. Robertson County wheat, my mother avers, is much softer in comparison to anything that you could buy at a local store in Nashville or from a larger chain. When she was working toward her biscuits-by-forty goal, we brought home more bags than I could count. I am not the first woman in my family to associate major life changes with baked goods. Since the mill closed, however, she and my MeeMee have been looking for an equivalent flour source. As I debated my own bread project, I decided that I couldn't make my first bread with some kind of large mill, commercial flour. Instead, I opted to explore the white mill building that is a kind of landmark in downtown Columbia—the home of Adluh Flour. Although I was pretty sure I could buy my flour at the local Piggly Wiggly on my way home, somehow I felt as though I had to buy from the mill itself. If I was in search of home, I was going to reach back as far as I could to make sure that I got the details right. Since going to Orlinda, Tennessee was not an option for flour any more, I was going to have to forge a relationship with a mill of my own.

I managed to fit my mill visit in between office hours and my linguistics class a few days before D-Day (Dough Day) was to commence. The Adluh mill is the last of its kind in South Carolina, and it is the source for many local restaurants' flour and grits. As I parked in the lot next to the mill, my car

rocking back and forth as it drove over the brick side street, I saw the remains of the railroad track that used to run right up to the mill and the one railcar that still remained. Although it was rusted, it gave me a sense of how the mill used to run, its white side doors open to load sacks full of flour, grits, and feed into waiting cars ready to get back down the track. It reminded me of driving by Mac Baggett's Grain Store every time we went to see MeeMee on the weekend, passing their loading docks and grain storage as we made our way out of town toward the farm. A sign near the mill office advertised that the older brick building, the one bearing the "Adluh Flour Co. Table Meal, Flour, Feed" sign in bold white letters, would soon be available for lease as individual apartment units. The glossy images seemed like they belonged in another world, entirely unrelated to the building I could see in front of me. I walked up to the main office, but was deterred by the yellow door baring a conspicuous "EMPLOYEES ONLY" sign. Instead, I headed up to a smaller out building—its side door was open, and it had no sign that implied I had better try elsewhere. The kindly man working inside smiled, and said I wasn't the first to knock on his door. To get to the mill store, I just needed to look for the yellow door right to the left of the employee door.

As I walked toward the office, having safely made it past the first doorway, I looked through the interior glass window to my right that showed

the inside of the mill. Although I couldn't see any machines—I figured they were much further back—I could see stacks and stacks of flour and cornmeal. White sacks bearing a blue label advertised "regular flour," the red label signaled contents that were "self-rising," and the brown sacks bore words that I could not quite make out. I peered at the bags as long as I could without drawing attention to myself, half afraid someone was going to ask what in the heck I was doing there. Looking at them through that small window felt like looking back at a different time, when people bought their goods in bulk because they needed to feed more mouths. Had they offered a tour I would have gladly taken one, but they stopped offering those a few years ago. Inside the office, two ladies looked up as I came through the door. The office itself was small, though its size was diminished by the stacks of paper throughout the room and the abundance of wood paneling that lined the walls. To the left of the entrance, there was a small shelf filled with flour, cornmeal, and several different mixes, ranging from their Sweet Potato Mix to a seasoned Seafood Breader.

The lady at the front desk smiled at my purchases, two large bags of flour, a sack of self-rising cornmeal, and an impulse Christmas ornament bearing the likeness of the Adluh Mill building. "Have you gotten your Christmas shopping done then?" she asked, adding up the total for my receipt. I smiled and said, "No, although depending on how all of this works out, I may be back to do some

flour shopping for my grandmother. She's been looking for a replacement source since their local mill closed… A pipeline from Columbia to Springfield, Tennessee may be her best option." The lady laughed, and asked what all of the flour was for. I lowered my voice and admitted that I was undertaking bread making for the first time, hoping to do my grandmother's bread and rolls justice. She smiled and wished me luck—I replied that I might just need it. As I left, I couldn't help but laugh. MeeMee would never believe the trouble I had gone to just to get two bags of flour. When I got home, I called both my MeeMee and my mama, glowing with a strange sense of accomplishment: Phase 1 was a go.

* * *

On a Thursday morning in November, I woke up in the dark and fumbled for the button that would light up my alarm clock. When I read 6:30, I sighed in relief—at least it was a proper time to wake up, and I wouldn't have to try to make myself sleep for a few more hours. It was time for D-Day to begin. Mike left for work as I put on the kettle for my first cup of tea. As I waited, I opened the curtains, pulled back the blinds, and began washing dishes, taking special care with the two loaf pans that would be taking their first maiden voyage. While I washed, I occasionally checked the water temperature with a meat thermometer. The yeast packages I bought the night before had very specific

instructions. The yeast will only work if the water it's placed in is between 100°F-115°F. If the water falls anywhere outside those very limited guidelines, the yeast will fail. More accurately, the yeast will die. Not wanting to begin my bread journey with the label yeast-killer, I tested the water at length, determined that I would be able to define what my MeeMee dubbed "comfortable water" by the end of the day. I learned that if the water from your sink emits any steam at all, you have gone too far. Yeast, like me, prefers warm but not overly hot, bathing temperatures.

As Mike and I had decided to forego hiring children to give our house bread-making energy, I decided to keep going—I would make my own energy. As the morning wore on, I found myself inhabited by my MeeMee's spirit. At family gatherings, it's a miracle if she can light on a seat longer than thirty seconds. More often than not, she will pause for a moment and then rise again, like a silver-haired hummingbird who can't decide which blossom needs more attention. No matter the occasion, she always manages to remember something that she needs to do, and is off before anyone else can volunteer to complete the task in her stead. When I was younger, she would come to our house for the weekend, a visit that was always precipitated by my mother's mandate to hide the ironing, the iron, and the ironing board. If MeeMee saw work that she could do to help my mama, she would not rest until it was done. When she left, the

house would always feel like it was in better order, even if she had only spent her time telling stories and cooking supper. She would always leave as soon as it was light, leaving an empty coffee cup as a sign that it hadn't all been a dream. At some point, I am sure I wondered whether she actually just turned into a coffee cup, though the absence of her car in the driveway suggested she travelled just like the rest of us. That morning, it was as though I was her. I had an almost frantic need to clean the kitchen, nay, the whole house. It was as though I was preparing for MeeMee to visit rather than preparing to make two loaves of bread. I couldn't seem to make myself move on until I had completed all of the jobs I knew she would do if she were here, rolling up her sleeves to complete the task before I could tell her otherwise. That, or, in my moments of doubt, I figured that should the attempt to engage with yeast kill me after all, I wanted to make sure that my affairs (and my kitchen) were in order. It just wouldn't do to have layers of additional mess under masses of exploded dough.

After the counters were scrubbed, all of the dishes were washed, and my newly cleaned cabinets smelled like an orange grove, I sat with my tea watching the ladies on the King Arthur Flour website make bread. One was clearly the expert. After displaying a montage of beautiful breads from around the world, she led the second lady through various bread-making challenges, starting with the dough itself. She wielded a strange looking device she called a Danish

Dough Whisk—at the end of a long wooden dowl, what looked like a metal flying saucer moved through the flour, water, and newly activated yeast. This magic wand then built the dough to what they affectionately dubbed the "shaggy mass stage," where the dough would cling to itself rather than to either of them. The expert admonished me not to add too much flour at once, and I sagely nodded my head while my insides quaked—too much flour, and I would end up with tough bread that would sink like a stone. As the novice took over the Danish Dough Whisk, I envied her gluten production. Though my recipes didn't call for it, I cycled through the video on kneading techniques, thankful that I would have time before I needed that particular skill. As I watched the expert in the third video place her loaf in the pan, I decided to go one step further, and make one of my loaves brown sugar-cinnamon swirl bread. Had we any raisins in the house, those would have been added as well, but Mike had declared raisins a dirty trick, mere chocolate chip imposters, so we were raisin-less. In that moment, I also decided among the list of recipes my mother had transcribed. Although there were smaller recipes, I decided that this was no time to play it safe. I was going to make Great Aunt Patsy's bread recipe, or suffer flour-induced tragedy in the attempt.

When the clock struck 9:00, I realized why I had felt the need to wait—until then, it might be too early to call MeeMee, who lives in the central time

zone. I wrapped up in a blanket on the couch, and dialed her number, wondering how long I would be able to keep her on the phone this time. The running joke in our family is that even if you call her, MeeMee is always in a hurry to get off the phone, sure she is keeping you from doing something important. My record thus far is fifteen minutes and five seconds, according to the timer on my phone. By next year, I am shooting for twenty. As she picked up the phone and answered "Hello?" I could hear my Uncle Sam's cockatiels in the background, chirping "Good Morning" from their cages near the kitchen. When the weather is cold, she often spends her early morning hours sitting in her kitchen at a small card table she has covered with a checkered, spill-proof cloth. She favors a simple white coffee cup, and a full carafe is always nearby, ready for refills. She calls this spot her nest, and over the years she has made it her own. At her little table, she writes letters, reads magazines, and works puzzles on a chair adorned with a fluffy ruby-colored cushion, one of her favorite hues. She likes the code word puzzles that make everyone else in the family want to give up—she works them in pen—working at least one a day, sometimes more. Though she likes this spot for many reasons, one of her favorite features is that there is a vent in the corner, keeping her cool in the summer, and warming her feet in the winter. It's also an easy perch from which she can keep an eye on her bread and whatever else might be on the stove. When

I heard her voice, it was as though I received some kind of bread benediction—as long as she knew that I was baking bread today, surely the bread wouldn't dare disappoint her. She had made Aunt Patsy's recipe, my choice for the day, many times and approved of it, though she did offer some words of caution.

> "It's been a good one, through years and years. For a while it was the only recipe I ever made. When they are good, they're good… But when they're bad, they're just awful. Do you have a bowl big enough?"

I looked around my kitchen, puzzled. What did she mean, big enough? After all of this effort, was I about to fail before I even began because my bowls were all too small?

> "Well, MeeMee, I have the big glass bowl that Mr. Jimmy and Ms. Jane got us for our wedding, it's the biggest bowl I have."
>
> Yes, but is it big *enough*? The only thing with Patsy's recipe is that you have to let it rise real good before you start to work with it. It needs lots of time to get real puffy before you can get started. You can always get it to rise and then put it in the fridge with plastic wrap to use tomorrow. Just make real sure that you've got it sealed down in there. If it dries out it's no good at all."

I sighed with relief, thankful that I would still be able to tackle my project, though I was now worried about the state of the air in my house. A few months

before, I had to move all of my houseplants—even the Christmas cactus—out on the sun porch. The house is dry enough that even with regular watering, all of the blooms dried up. When I checked on them, they littered the table with their pink corpses. I set a pot of water to boil on the stove, determined not to let another variable get in my way.

"Well, MeeMee, if the dough takes a bigger bowl than this one, it will make too much dough for me or Mike to eat. I think it will be okay."

"Okay, if you're sure… You don't have anything else to do today though, right? Now, I don't want you making bread if you need to go to classes today. You're going to need plenty of time to get everything done."

I assured MeeMee that I was going to be fine on time. Granted, I did have a linguistics class that afternoon, but I was sure that I would be finished before 2:00. Five hours had to be plenty of time. I promised to call to give her an update, turned up the heat in my house, and prepared for the adventure to come.

* * *

Aunt Patsy's recipe calls for two opening moves. First, I was to mix together one cup of hot water with a half cup of Crisco, stirring the two together, and then setting it aside to cool. In the meantime, she directed me to pour one cup of *warm* water over one package of yeast. I should then add one teaspoon of sugar to feed the yeast, and wait to see if it was still alive. While I waited for my

tea kettle to boil, I went ahead and mixed the yeast, water that MeeMee would deem "comfortable," and sugar together. When the water hit the yeast, my small kitchen filled with an earthy, nutty smell that sweetened with the addition of the sugar. Although I knew I was only smelling the yeast with my nose, the taste of sugar somehow found its way to my mouth and settled. The yeast granules became smooth, and tiny bubbles appeared, signaling faint signs of life. I leaned my head over the bowl, determined not to miss any indications that the project might be a success. The small bubbles that let me take my first breath of relief began to spread, forming a ring around the outside of the bowl. We breathed in harmony, the yeast and I, each filling the air with slow sighs and signs of life. With a plop, the first brown bubbles emerged from the center of the bowl, hissing and blooming into a ring. The bubbles grew like small shoots on a plant, extending their reach further until the met the edges of the bowl. As the bloom flowered, it filled my kitchen with the warm, salt-sugar scent of bread. My kitchen smelled like I was five, and I had just come in the door from school, making a bee line for the kitchen because MeeMee's burgundy car was in the driveway. I had never seen chemistry that looked and so beautiful. I might have done better at molecular geometry if it had looked anything like this.

When I added my hot water to the half cup of Crisco, it felt like I reached some kind of Southern milestone. I think that the packages had been there since

last Thanksgiving when my mother made biscuits and cornbread for the dressing. This time, however, I was the one to peel back the silver wrapping, revealing the block of white shortening underneath. I whisked the Crisco and hot water together, making a thick slurry in the bottom of the bowl. As the Crisco separated, it formed fine droplets on the surface of the water. With my Crisco cooling and yeast rising, I opened my first bag of Adluh flour, hoping that it would deliver me from disaster. MeeMee advised that I should sift my flour first, as I might need more than the recommended six cups. Although bread making is a supposedly precise art, I was coming to find out that the initial precision always gives way to a multitude of conditional statements. It's as though the art of bread making tries to keep non-experts out on purpose, weeding out the weak with gluten-plagued nightmares. The flour sifted quickly, almost like powdered sugar. It was the softest flour I had ever worked with. The ten minutes for the yeast elapsed faster than I expected. I shuffled to determine whether or not the Crisco mixture had officially moved from warm to cool. Baffled by the distinction, wondering what "cool" meant to Aunt Patsy, I decided to use my thermometer once more. As long as the mixture wasn't hot enough to kill the yeast, it would be fine. It would have to be fine.

Praying good thoughts to those who provide for first time bread bakers, I poured my yeast into the Crisco, and began adding the other ingredients: 1 egg,

beaten, a half cup of sugar, 1 teaspoon of salt, and the first of at least six cups of flour. I added my flour in half cup increments, determined not to be one of the bakers who ends up with tough, heavy bread as my video instructors implied. By the second cup, my bowl looked as though it was full of a slightly yellow, thickened pancake batter, and yeast bubbles dotted its surface. The third cup of flour released the first signs that this dough knew where it was headed, even if I did not. As I stirred the mixture, my nose told me that if I closed my eyes, I could picture my grandmother's kitchen as it once was. In the past few years, they had to renovate the house. It's over a hundred years old, and was beginning to suffer from a plague of termites. While they worked on the house, they added insulation and modernized the kitchen. When I was younger, however, the kitchen was not only home to a stove, an oven, and countertops, fare that you could find in any old kitchen. My MeeMee's kitchen also held a dough station. Although it had louvered wooden doors like a closet, I never recall them being shut. When I arrived, they were always thrust open, with flour covering the counter, and the dough bowl sitting in the center, surrounded by bags of sugar, flour, and MeeMee's old hand sifter. It was a place where magical things happened. I felt closer to home than I had in months.

Fortunately, I also managed to spill flour into my slipper at the time. It's impossible to have sentimental tears when your toes are covered in flour. With

the sixth cup of flour, the dough changed. No longer was it slender strands of gluten, cloying to the sides of the bowl. It looked as though it was time for me to get my hands dirty. I added level half-cups of flour with my left hand, and worked the dough with my right. It clung to my hands, forming sticky cream-colored ropes around my fingers. No matter how tightly I tried to hold them together, the dough spread them apart, determined to have its own way. After adding each half cup of flour, I used my left hand to turn the bowl, working the newly-forming dough ball into the flour pockets that remained. My body curved, as I leaned into each rotation of the dough. By the time I reached 7 ¾ cups, I knew I had either made it or killed it. Regardless, the dough was no longer sticking to me. It was finally sticking to itself. I placed it on the stove top, covered it with a maroon flour sack towel, and hoped that there would be enough activity in the air for it to rise.

After an hour and a half of constant peeking to no avail, I crept into the kitchen one more time. It had been an hour and a half, enough time for even the most recalcitrant dough to develop some kind of presence. When I turned the corner, I noticed the towel: it had moved. Though it was still perched on top of the bowl, it was domed. The dough had pushed forward, past the limits of the cloth, and it was now alive. As I uncovered the dough, I let out a cross between a sigh of relief and a gasp of surprise. This dough that I had made on my own, by

myself, was now twice its size. Jubilant, I called my MeeMee to check in, and I also checked the clock—it was already 12:00. She was tickled by my success thus far, and said, "Not too much longer now, and you'll be ready to punch it down and rise again. It won't be too long until those loaves will be in the oven."

I squirmed uncomfortably, knowing that I would have to confess about my class that afternoon. "Well, in case I need to… just in case… I have a class I may need to go to at 2:00… do you think it would be alright to put it in the fridge?" Like always, there was no lecture or admonishment that she had told me so, though she might have been thinking it—bread does take longer than you'd think. "No, you'll be fine, just punch it down, and make sure you oil it good before you seal it up. You just don't want the thing to dry out on you before tomorrow." I nodded my head, and said, "But MeeMee, do I really have to punch it down? It just feels so…*wrong*. It worked so hard to get there. *I* worked so hard to get it there." She laughed and said, "It never feels right, but that's just how dough works. Poke it down, put it in the fridge, and set it to rise in the morning. It'll be alright." After I got off the phone, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and took a fist to my dough. It hissed and made a "poof" sound before deflating. If felt like murder. However, the act was done. I oiled it with my flour coated hands, and dutifully double-sealed it, taking no chances.

If I had only known what was to come, I think I would have skipped class and baked it anyway.

* * *

When I woke up the next morning, I was tired. Gone was the MeeMee spirit that had invaded my body the day before. I had tossed and turned all night, plagued by the thought that my dough had failed—that I had failed. Before going to bed I checked almost hourly to make sure that the cool temperature in the fridge hadn't turned my dough baby into a shrunken mass. Each time I opened the door I held my breath, and was always surprised to find that it was, in fact, still alive. At the chiropractor's office I moved quickly through my exercises, ready to get home and have done with the act of waiting. When Mike innocently mentioned our bread project to one of the staff members, she queried, "Oh… you still do gluten?" We took our white flour guilt home with us, though I railed against the nutrition-only view of food all the way there. As I expounded upon the importance of food as a means to talk about culture, values, and issues far beyond the table, I am sure that Mike counted his blessings that his Friday would be spent on the golf course rather than in the kitchen.

In need of guidance and a figurative pat on the head, I called my mother for a second bread blessing. She answered the phone with a warm "Hello, how is the baker this morning?" I laughed and said, "The baker is tired… and she is

ready to see this thing through. Making dough takes something out of you. It's an act of willing the flour and yeast into something else." I cradled the phone between my jawbone and shoulder as I hoisted the dough bowl out of the fridge, elated to find small air bubbles on the surface. Despite the cold and my own inexperience, it wasn't dead. I pulled off the plastic wrap and set it back on the stovetop for it to rise back up again after checking for a second time that it really would be alright to let it rise again before placing it in the pans. My mother calmed my nerved and asked me to take notes. In the spirit of a family project, my dad had bought some yeast at the store for mom to play with over the weekend. I squealed with delight that she was finally going to face her dough nemesis and said with a day's experience behind me, "Of course you can do it. You just have to think good thoughts to the yeast. I haven't said a bad, discouraging word to it since it came in the house. I just keep telling it that it's going to work fine… and then I triple check with my meat thermometer to make sure I'm not lying to it."

I waited all afternoon for the bread dough to rise, changing out pots of water to try to feed the yeast and its specific environmental needs. However, somewhere after hour three, I broke. It was time, whether the dough thought so or not—I was not going to wait any more. I took the maroon cloth off of the dough bowl, despite the fact that the dough had yet to push past its surface. As I

peered at the sides of the bowl, I told myself that the bubbles I could clearly see were a sign of good things to come. "Dead bread cannot produce bubbles," I whispered, as I greased my loaf pans, mixed up the brown sugar and cinnamon I intended to roll into the second loaf, and hefted my dough out of its home. It clung to the bowl for a moment, as though afraid to leave the safety of its boundaries, and then plopped onto the counter. If the dough were a student, it would be the one who sits at the back of the room, arms crossed, legs splayed, daring you to try to make a difference. As I touched the dough for the first time, I recoiled. It was warm and sticky; pieces of it clung to the bowl that I placed on the counter. Something was not right.

I re-floured my hands, hoping that I was mistaken, though my gut already knew the truth. As I moved my fingers around the dough, hoping to shape it into a mound, it squelched between my fingers. It oozed over the floured cutting board, escaping the confines of my hands each time I tried to touch it. The gluten was gone. In its place I had a deformed mass, like the clay pot I once tried to spin on the wheel in art class. I moved my hands to shape it, and each time it collapsed in on itself, leaving me with a misshapen lump instead. From a distance, as I wiggled my fingers, unable to verbalize my horror, I looked like a small child who has discovered the sticky powers of half-dried Elmer's glue for the first time. I put my hands together and then moved them apart. A tenuous

dough-web remained between my now separated palms, and I knew in my soul it was over. The dough was dead.

With flour covered hands I called my mother, and tremulously asked if there was any possibility that I had missed a step—if the dough could be rescued, revived. She sucked in a deep breath and said, "I am so sorry. I am just so sorry. I think it's time to call MeeMee… she's the only one who would know." I called MeeMee's number, and managed to squeak out my dilemma. She stated matter of fact, "Well, no, you don't let the dough rise in the bowl out of the fridge. You just go ahead and divide it into your loaves, and let them rise on the stove. After that you'll be ready to go." I thanked her and hung up the phone, unsure whether she had caught on to the fact that the damage had already been done. I felt helpless, incompetent, and, as I scraped the sticky mess into the trash, a little angry. How dare that dough not work? I sobbed on the phone to Mike, feeling every bit like Meg March when her jelly refused to gel—her first cooking failure after marriage. When I first read *Little Women*, I had no empathy for Meg. Surely she could find some humor in the fact that the jelly refused to change state. Now, however, I could see her point. Cookery that takes all day and results in failure is no laughing matter. I wished that I could go home.

As I waited for Mike, I stared at the dough mass in the trash, its yeasty scent still lingering in the air. Somehow, the trash didn't seem far away

enough—even if it went out to the trashcan, our garage would smell like bread dough for the entire weekend. At that moment, I finally understood my grandmother's first cooking tragedy for the first time. As a young wife, she wanted to make cookie dough, though she had never made any kind of dough, cookie or otherwise, before. While everyone else was out working, she measured her ingredients and began putting the dough together, or so she thought. MeeMee has never been particularly forthcoming as to what went wrong. The only thing she will say is that it was bad… very, very bad. What was she to do? If she put the dough in the trash, everyone would find out. While this might seem like a trivial joke that would die down in time, this was not the case in her husband's family. The Borthicks were born teasers, and whatever they caught you up in would follow you to your grave and thereafter, when you wouldn't be able to defend yourself. So, MeeMee did the only thing a self-respecting cookie dough failure could do. She hauled that dough to the backyard, picked up a shovel, and buried it before anyone was the wiser. Had our backyard soil not been so tough, I think I would have grabbed a shovel myself. When Mike entered the door, I pointed to the trash and said, "It. Needs. To. Go. Out."

* * *

Grieving a cooking experience is an odd thing. Sometimes, the grief refuses to pass, and that becomes the dish you never make again—to the point

where you no longer even want to eat it when someone else makes it. Sometimes, that recipe becomes your white whale, something to chase until you have conquered it and made it your own. With the bread, I didn't have the option to leave it behind. When I moved to South Carolina two years ago, my MeeMee gave me a going away present: her dough bowl. As she put it in my hands, she said, "You're the only one I know who really wants it, and who will take care of it. No one else would want to fool with it. You can't use it to make your dough—it's been patched too much at the bottom and it might give you a hard time. But if you want it, it's yours." In my bones, I felt that I could not keep that dough bowl without knowing how to make decent bread. At this point, it was about more than mastering a family recipe—it was about proving that I had something of my grandmother in me, something that even the dough could recognize.

The next morning, I found myself doing something that I had deliberately set out not to do: baking bread with my husband. I'm not sure where the idea came from that I had to do it all on my own or it wasn't going to be an authentic experience. Just because MeeMee had to do it alone doesn't mean that it was in any way enjoyable—in some cases, such practices ended with tears and trips to dig a hole in the backyard. As we lined up our ingredients, I moved with purpose. It's as though the grief of past bread dough had settled into my skin,

coating me in a fine dust of flour and experience. My hands moved more quickly—they knew where the previous mistakes had been even before my brain registered such thoughts. I boiled the water for my Crisco, and waited until it was almost cool before I set the yeast to bloom. Instead of rising up in a ring, this time the bubbles created an intricate, doily pattern, tenuous strands of fungus turned lace. I watched Mike's glee at the ever-changing yeast concoction and found the joy in bread making again.

As I added the flour to the dough, Mike acted as my counter, ensuring that I did not forget which half-cup of flour I was on, which was a very real possibility. My hands moved with confidence, determined to see the dough form into a respectable ball shape once more. Mid-way through mixing, I received my mother's first text message: "Time to begin making bread dough… oh boy." I smiled at the thought of our double project, oiled the top of my dough, and waited to see what would happen. Despite my renewed faith in baking, however, I was not going to leave this dough to chance. While waiting I still did my fair share of peeking, tinkering with pots of boiling water, and calling on Mike to provide perspective, citing that I just couldn't tell if it had moved at all. Perspective tends to vanish when you refuse to step away.

After two hours, I slipped the dough onto a floured board and cut it in half, cleaving one section of dough from the other. I folded the first half like an

envelope, smoothing the seams and then scooping it into a pre-greased pan. Before tackling the second ball of dough, I took a deep breath, and then asked Mike for the rolling pin. Rolling out dough is tricky business. If you don't flour your pin enough, the dough will claim it as its own, covering it with sticky strands that seem impossible to dislodge. Too much flour, however, and you risk making your dough tough and unappetizing. I rolled quickly and lightly, afraid to press too hard lest the dough deflate before my very eyes. Once I had created a large rectangle, I spooned melted butter, brown sugar, and cinnamon in even layers over its surface, and began rolling it up from the short end. For a moment I contemplated deviating from the plan. After all, this was so close to the recipe for cinnamon rolls that I could just cut them up and see what would happen. I thought of coming into my MeeMee's kitchen, and seeing the countertops covered with cinnamon rolls, the best surprise that a fall visit had to offer. My better judgment, however, won out and I folded the dough into the pan as planned. The time for taking risks was over—two good loaves of bread would bring me close enough.

The dough rose quickly, almost before I had time to take too many peeks. As I waited, I traded calls with my mother. Although her rolls had fallen flat, she was the triumphant creator of several mini-loaves of bread. In our kitchen, Mike measured the loaves to ensure that the bread never rose above the dreaded one-

inch line. According to my King Arthur Flour video gurus, if the dough ever rises over one inch from the rim, your bread will shrink in the oven. After my last dough experience, I was pretty sure that the incredible shrinking dough act would push me over the edge. I slipped the loaf pans into the oven, only slightly alarmed by the weight I felt over their potential success or failure. It was just bread, wasn't it? Why should it be a matter of such gravity? I watched them bake through the oven window, cheering them on as they developed to a beautiful golden brown, but not brave enough to crack the door open until at least twenty minutes had passed. We took the loaves out of the oven, and waited for them to cool, just long enough so that we wouldn't sustain steam burns. I flipped the golden loaf pans onto a countertop covered in dishtowels, and marveled at the even butterscotch hue of each loaf. The crust made a dull thumping sound when struck, like a ripe watermelon, and the top crust hinted at a soft crumb interior. As I sliced each loaf with a serrated knife, crumbs flaked onto the counter, just like when I would cut my roll in two as a child. As I placed a piece of the plain bread and its cinnamon-swirled counterpart on a plate, I realized that my house finally smelled like my grandmother's—it smelled like home. Mike tasted the cinnamon swirl bread and pronounced it good, leaving for the comfort of the living room, plate in hand. I smoothed a thin layer of butter across the plain loaf and let it melt. This was what I had waited for all

along. I tasted the salt of crust and butter, the sweetness of yeast-sugar, and the delicate crumbs melted on my tongue. I called MeeMee and announced the happy news with satisfaction. She laughed and said, "You finally held your mouth right, girl. That's the way with dough… Someone can tell you how to do it and walk you through it, but you have to learn how to feel it for yourself for it to take at all.