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Like I Said

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LIKE I SAID

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Dedication

For my mother, my best friend from birth, who taught me how to tell a story but worried I would never learn to tell the truth.

Acknowledgements

Without the following people, this book would not have been possible:

(I'm not kidding.)

Jim Barilla, Anna Barry, Elise Blackwell, Jennifer Blevins, Scott Cairns, Jessica Handler, Joseph Hendrix, Kurt Hoberg, Chris Koslowski, Rebecca Landau, Trudy Lewis, Beth Peterson, Christina Phillips, Maureen Stanton, Marly Swick, Jon Timmons, Nicola Waldron, and of course, my family.

Abstract

Like I Said is a collection of memoir essays spanning the author's life from his earliest memories to the present day. Topics touched on include but are not limited to: the struggle of being raised as an undiagnosed sufferer of ADHD, the cultural/familial dynamics at work in rural southeast Missouri, the author's trial with hitting puberty and finding religion in the same year, and the ongoing shifts in the Mossman family's relational dynamics in the years since the author's mother was first diagnosed with breast cancer.

Structurally, the text takes inspiration from the "lyric essay," a subgenre of creative nonfiction that utilizes poetic language and associative juxtaposition to build a narrative and overall meaning. *Like I Said* should be considered a "book in mosaic"—a series of seemingly disparate, unassociated narrative essays connected as a "whole" via the author's persistent experimentation with form, repeated allusions to the art of storytelling and the infinite imaginative possibilities therein, and the progression of a narrative arc of the author/narrator and the member's of his family that becomes apparent when working one's way through the text. As mentioned, from essay to essay the text contains a wide variety of forms available to writers in the genre of creative nonfiction, including "speculative nonfiction," "fabulist nonfiction," "lyric essay," and many other "hybrid" forms of the genre which blend elements of fiction and poetry to tell a story based in fact. This play with form and structure is informed by the author's poetic assertion that the writing of memoir, being primarily informed by the author's fractured,

disorganized, and elusive memory should embrace and even mimic these elements of the source of each story's creation that might otherwise seem to invalidate the form or premise of "nonfiction." Through telling the story of a single man's life through a variety of storytelling modes, voices, and perspectives, *Like I Said* makes the implicit argument that the ongoing competition between memory and imagination at battle in the minds of authors of creative nonfiction should help more than hinder the craft of creatively telling true stories.

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Part 1: Telling Stories

Purple Carrots

“Let’s make up a story,” Mom says.

She’s laying with her eyes to me, her body stretched across the top of my Ninja Turtles comforter. I’m three or four now. Beneath the blankets, my underwear feature Superman taking flight away from my butt. I’m wearing a white shirt with a big red heart on it that says, “I Love Lucy Lee,” the hospital where I was born, the one Mom has always worked at. This is a new game. I’m not sure how to play.

“But how do we do the pictures?” I ask her.

I can’t read much yet, but from what I’ve learned up to this point, the best stories—*Goodnight Moon*, *Hop on Pop*, *The Monster at the End of the Book*—are all big and bright with lots of color all over the pages. I’m not that sleepy and Grover doesn’t seem like he’d be hard to draw but I’m pretty sure my crayons are in my bag somewhere in the living room with the TV and the Cardinals and Dad, whose already told me twice that it’s time to go to bed. All that coloring would probably take forever, anyway.

But I wonder why Mom came up with this story-making thing in the first place? I’m certain she’s not worn out on rereading the classics—who could tire of *Ernest the Fierce Mouse* or *Chuck Wood and the Woodchucks in The Big Game*?—but maybe Mom doesn’t like how I ask so many questions while she’s just trying to read. It isn’t my fault every story has so many parts missing. I want to know more than what the storytellers write on the pages of their books. *How come Grover lives inside of this book instead of*

on Sesame Street? Is the book where he lives when he's not on TV? Is he trapped in there? Does he need my help?

Mom can tell I'm getting excited. She reaches over, tussles my white-blond hair so thin it stands on end at the lightest touch. Mom is almost always this nice to me, especially when it's time for bed. She's the opposite of the cartoon lady on her nightdress—the sweaty lady with triangle hair who's flailing her arms and shouting, “Ack!” and something about chocolate, I think. Mom never shouts about chocolate or at my sister or at me, though sometimes when we're in the car she sings really loud that she needs to go pee.

“We'll make the pictures in our minds, baby,” Mom answers and finally she's making some sense. I reach for my pet t-rex, Fred, because I feel sort of bad for him. He hasn't been the same since I took those scissors to his teeth.

“Think about it like you're making your own dream.”

Despite what she says, I guess Mom doesn't know everything I'm doing even when she's not with me. She must not know that once the lights go out, after I've had my fill of Fred and Pooh Bear and the monkey with a knot in his tail, I go to this place where I can make anything happen, all I have to do is think. There's scary stuff there, too—Spiderman, for one thing—but I can flap my arms to get away from him if I need to. I've even seen Mom there a few times. You'd figure she'd know something about the place.

“What happens in the story?” I ask her.

We're both on our backs now, looking up at the cracks along the ceiling. The big fan up there is all wobbly, making that *click-click-click* sound that keeps me up some

nights. The Ninja Turtles on my curtains swerve and dance against the window. I hear Mom smile.

“That’s the fun of it,” she says, “You and me have to figure that out.”

* * *

Let’s say there’s a rabbit. What does he do?

He gets in a rocket and goes to the moon.

And what does a rabbit do on the moon?

He picks carrots. Purple ones. And blue.

Flies and Rocks or: Objects that Have Briefly Made a Home Inside of My Body

STITCHES

I must have been about the same height as the trash bin at the time.

It was a Saturday and Dad and I had the afternoon alone together, so I was in my room playing and Dad was lying on the couch. Probably he was watching baseball, what he was always watching. The sport seemed to have an indefinite season. Either that, or Dad really liked reruns, liked watching the same red guys play the same blue guys over and over again. It was hard to tell the difference.

Me and Dad being home alone like this didn't happen very often. On a normal weekend, my sister would be here and we could play with her Barbies or race my Hot Wheels cars around. But Alicia was out with Mom right now, doing I don't know what. They never bothered to tell me since I didn't know that many words. In my room alone with all the same old stuff, it wasn't long before I got bored and then lonely. I wanted to do something new. I wanted to get back the toy that the day before my mother had stolen from me.

* * *

The night before, I'd been hanging around my mother's ankles as she drifted back and forth through the kitchen on her way to the laundry room. I liked to follow Mom like this, to make my steps as wide as hers, walk like a big boy does, but mostly I just wanted her to pick me up. I tried to stay close enough behind her that I was impossible to ignore, but far enough back that I wouldn't get run over, should she make a sudden turn. Mom's

legs smelled like pantyhose, like they always did, even though she was in her laundry shorts. She wore a t-shirt with Tweety on it, though he didn't look like the Tweety I'd ever seen in the cartoon. This Tweety looked like he wanted to beat somebody up. Years later, when I could read, I saw that Mad Tweety was saying, "*What attitude?!*" I think it was supposed to be funny.

Something caught my attention as Mom and I made one of our rounds through the kitchen that night: a little ball thing resting on the floor behind the bottom lip of the stove. Buried treasure, long forgotten. I wasn't supposed to ever touch the stove. It was a rule I knew and followed because Mom had shown me the heat that came out of the top of it and told me that if I ever touched it not only would I be in trouble but whatever part of me had touched it would hurt bad for a very long time.

But the ball thing wasn't really *touching* the stove. It was just barely underneath it. I could reach down there and grab the thing so fast Mom would never even know where it came from. The little ball would soon be mine.

I let Mom walk back to the living room without me, double-checked that no one else was looking, and soon I had the ball thing in my hand. It was dark blue like nighttime but when you can still see what's going on outside. Like blue Koolaid looked when I closed the door of the fridge just enough to turn the light out. And the ball was hard, a perfectly round rock that felt sticky against my fingers, not like any ball I'd ever seen before.

"Matthew Shane, what's that in your hand?"

Mom had made a surprise attack from around the corner between the kitchen and the living room, caught me captivated by my new favorite toy. I clutched the Koolaid

rock in my fist, hoped she'd forget she'd ever seen it. Hoped it would disappear into me, become part of my palm.

“Hand it over, Matthew,” Mom said. My plan was foiled.

Mom's lip turned up when she took the ball little ball from me. She didn't seem to care for the stickiness of it, like I did.

“You can't have things like this yet,” she told me, “Too small for you.”

She pulled up the lid of the big can at the end of the counter and I heard the ball thud to what I figured was the bottom. My eyes exploded. I only quit wailing when Mom picked me up and promised she'd get me an even better ball tomorrow. One big enough to be safe around my small body. One too big to fit inside my mouth.

* * *

The next afternoon, my Dad on the couch with his back to the kitchen, I went back for the ball thing. I crawled down the hallway, scooting behind the couch as I crossed through the living room, and once I reached the linoleum of the kitchen I stood up on two feet.

I opened the lid to the trash can, but I couldn't see much farther down than the upper edge of the big black bag. I reached my hand as far down as I could and the lid closed on my arm. Nothing I touched felt like the ball thing. Everything inside felt wet and the crack in the lid smelled like ham and beans with dirt in them. Then, I heard the *plunk!* I shoved my hand fast in the direction I thought I heard my ball and got my finger stuck in something sharp and hard that I couldn't see. I screamed.

By the time we got home from the hospital, where Mom had been at work, she was yelling a lot of questions about what Dad had been doing and where had he been. Dad answered but what he said didn't make her stop. It must have been hard to explain how, just a few feet away from you, your kid could be digging in the trash.

“He's still a baby,” my mom was saying, and Dad could only shake his head. ““You wouldn't think an open tin can could do all of that,” he finally said.

* * *

ROCKS

The doctor's hands were shaking, my mother tells me. You had it really far back there. He had these long forceps and he kept looking into the nostril with a small flashlight, but he just couldn't see it. We knew it was in there—there was almost no air coming out of that side of your nose and the ladies at daycare had *seen* you do it: just sitting out there running your race cars through the pea gravel like any other day when you picked up a little brown rock, looked at it, then shoved it right into your nose. They watched you, but they probably didn't think anything of a little kid looking at a rock. I'm sure that there wasn't enough time to stop you from doing it, anyway.

You know that there was one time they called me from daycare just because they couldn't catch you? Three grown women couldn't snatch up a three-year-old kid. Imagine what I had to tell my boss after I got that phone call: “Um, I have to go up to the daycare. Matthew's running around and no one can grab him. ...I know! But, that's what they said!” Of course, by the time I got up there, it was all over and the principal had your butt planted on a chair in her office. Taquita, that was her name. She knew

how to deal with you. The rest of them were clueless. You about had the pastor's wife—she was your teacher—almost ready to give up the profession.

Another time, they called your dad and me into the office, the pastor and your teacher, and the pastor told us that we just needed to break your spirit, said that you “needed to learn to conform and behave,” that we needed to “mold you into a good child.” Well, you *know* that got me hot, so I just told him flat-out that there was *no way* we were doing *that*. You'd already developed such a distinct personality, so I told him that I wasn't going to do anything that might get in the way of you becoming whomever you were meant to become. He didn't like that answer, of course. He turned to your dad and said, “And what do *you* have to say about that?” and your dad just said, “I think you need to listen to *her*.”

Anyway, I guess you were trying to get the little rock out with your finger when they figured out what had happened, but by then you'd already shoved it in so deep that not even the doctor could see it. He got it, though, thank God. It could have fallen down your windpipe into your lung. That's why he was shaking, I think. He didn't want *that* to be *his* fault.

I still have that rock, you know. That little rock cost me forty-five bucks.

* * *

What's funny, well, it wasn't funny at the time, but a week later I got another call from the daycare and they said, “You won't believe it. He's got a rock in his *ear* now.” Well, I was not about to pay another forty-five bucks for a piece of gravel, so I came and got you, brought you home and told you to lay across the bed while I went after it with a

pair of tweezers. You squirmed and made a fuss, but I got that sucker. I still have that one, too. I keep that rock and the other one in a little bag with all of your baby teeth.

* * *

HAMBURGER

I'm too old to be in this room. And it's too dark in here. And I've got better things to do than sleep the afternoon away. I sit up and look around. They're all asleep. *How? Babies, that's how, I guess. But we just ate lunch, I think. Did not that fruit cocktail give you something to live for? Did not that triangle of bread and butter fill you with fiery aspirations, an aching to be free?* I gaze at the bright gap in the door and almost salivate. I know that beyond that band of golden fluorescent light is a large, mole-covered woman who will, within moments of my escape, snatch me by my waistband and drag my carpet-burned knees back to this dark abyss and this lumpy brown nap-mat, but, oh, that I might try. That I might crawl along the darkest edges of this perfectly square room, nimbly leap-frogging the unconscious dupes that line the floors with so much wasted potential. That I might find that perfect window of time when the mole-woman is called away by her unseemly addiction to aggressively emptying cans of Lysol disinfectant, one after another—often simply into the air absent of any rationale, that acrid chemical mist raining down into the vulnerably open eyes of so many innocent, scampering babes—that I might snatch the middle-set knob, might pull wide the huge, foreboding door to the chapel, that I—“Lie down, Matthew. Go to sleep.” That I might lie down upon this lumpy brown nap-mat and pray for a dream worthy of this brief lapse of daylight, a dream that, of course, will never come.

This naptime is my penance. I was, for a brief period, set free from this dreadful practice, but that was until a wager was put forth that I could not fit an entire sandwich of hamburger behind the gates of my closed lips—a wager that I gleefully accepted. It should be stated that I was also the one who brought forth the aforementioned challenge, but this is only for posterity's sake. Nevertheless, the hamburger did, in fact, fit into my mouth in its entirety, but only for a moment. Chewing and swallowing were the vitally absent components in my contingency plan.

For whatever reason, and around small children especially it seems, something of a commotion seems to follow the unexpected expectoration of a ne'er bitten hamburger sandwich. Hardly a minute's time had passed before I was cuffed around both arms and dragged away. The tall ones in charge seated me amongst other unfamiliar giants, each aged nearly half a score. Most cruel of all, the foul sentries didn't even bother to replace my now disposed-of hamburger. They left me only with a few paltry sides and a bit of cold milk to wash them down. This would be my last day of preschool.

Once my fair mother had learned of my inexplicably unjust desserts, her eyes were hot embers. She stormed the front office at dawn, an exceptional regiment of choice words and phrases at her disposal for those so-called academic professionals who did not take kindly to a child apt to stretch the limits in capacity of a mouth of his very own possession. Aptly, their ears bent back like dogs. We were asked not to return to the academy, thank you.

Thus, I lay here in silence in this toddler-filled prison of deepest black, rolling my tongue around like I've caught a tiny boulder in my cheek, perfectly round and smooth and impossible to choke on: a rock of my own invention.

* * *

CHANGE

The Coin-Eater, they called him, as they had since he was a boy. He was known to have swallowed pennies for simple sport, for nothing but the brief moment of triumph at seeing their passage through the unseen universe of his insides come to fruition: tiny glints of copper peeking out among the submerged refuse.

They called him The Coin-Eater, though coins he no longer ate. He was not quite a man yet—that would take many years—but he was, by now, certainly more wide and lengthy than he had been in the days when he would stoop over the solemn commode, hunting with his eyes for his own brand of buried treasure.

It was a balmy August afternoon, far too hot and sticky for mucking around outdoors, when, full of the energy of youth, two cousins—The Coin-Eater, included, of course—played a makeshift game of handball in the cool shelter of a basement.

Being a low-ceilinged, rather tight basement, the boys could not run, as young children are so often wont to do in these kinds of games. They could hardly move, truth be told. But, these conditions did little to dilute their skillful play. They batted and tossed the checkered ball back and forth across the wooly carpet; made huge, harrowing leaps from their knees to snatch the spherical missile just moments before it could crash into a fine vase, or a set of brass candlesticks, or any number of inexplicably arranged, sentimentally priceless statuettes.

It was during one such harrowing leap that a medium-sized silver coin jostled free from The Coin-Eater's pocket, the dull thump it made as it met the carpet just loud enough to be heard. The Coin-Eater did not want to lose this coin because this coin

belonged to *him* and no one else, certainly not his cousin, nor mother, nor sister, nor aunt. It was *his* coin and he, alone, would keep it safe, that much The Coin-Eater knew.

But, when a pocket fails, there are few other options, so it was with little hesitation or fanfare that The Coin-Eater popped the silver coin into his mouth and the game began again.

Anyone can guess what happened next.

A brutal strike from the fist of his cousin launched the ball dead into the center of The Coin-Eater's gut and—*phoomp!*—the silver coin was gone. The Coin-Eater grabbed his throat, assured at that moment of his speedily approaching demise yet shocked to find himself breathing without extra effort. Still, he could feel every bit of the hard wholeness of the silver object as it inched its way down to the exit pipe at the end of his throat, its tiny ridges carving their way along the walls of his esophagus like a dull, serrated blade.

The x-rays showed a perfectly round circle lodged somewhere along the winding path of The Coin-Eater's mysterious innards. Though he surely must have known something of The Coin-Eater's infamous history, the doctor had his doubts that this particularly large coin—unlike those that came before it—would be able to make its full journey unaided. Still, he was unimpressed with The Coin-Eater's feat. Castor oil and orange juice twice a day. Monitor the stool. Call in a week.

There is little that compares to an early morning glass of orange juice topped with an unsettled layer of intestinal lubricant. The Coin-Eater knew that now. He pinched his nose, though it was the thick, greasy texture, not the taste of the oil that made him gag with every swallow. He rarely finished the entire glass.

On the playground, The Coin-Eater would brag to the other children about the small fortune he'd managed to stow away down his gullet. Much like the doctor, they, too, were unmoved. *Prove it*, they would say, but of course The Coin-Eater could never do this. Even a forgery would, no doubt, brand him an exile. *A bit of mud...?* No. No. It couldn't be done.

For a week or more, The Coin-Eater bent over the bowl more or less once a day, perusing the contents with his eyes for a providential glimmer shining out from that tiny placid sea. But, the glimmer never came.

Another trip to the doctor, another x-ray, and this time: nothing. The bright disc in his belly was gone. The picture was just a bunch of bones and densely opaque, twisted things.

The Coin-Eater was empty with no prize to show for it.

On the way home, The Coin-Eater's mother asked him why it was that he seemed so sad.

"I never even got to see it," he said, turning back to the passenger window.

The Coin-Eater's mother shook her head in disbelief. She struggled to trace her own biological connection to a being so desperately fixated on human waste.

Unfortunately, they wore the same blue eyes.

"Um. . . I'm sure that wherever it went, it's in a better place now," she said, stifling a gag.

The Coin-Eater nodded, considering his mother's words, then closed his eyes and lost himself in thought, tracing the path of the tiny treasure once one with his body as it made its way through one set of pipes and another and another, through streams and

rivers, maybe even all the way to the ocean, a part of himself alive in the world beyond his boy-shaped composition.

* * *

FLIES

My body is a trap. It is a cage. A cave: climate-controlled and pitch black inside.

* * *

Once, at nineteen in Arizona, I made my way into a cave full of flies, but I never made it farther than the edge of the swarm. There must have been thousands, wholly silent up until the moment I was among them. Or perhaps my ears were out of tune. But flies do not make music. They do not sing. Their buzz is the rapid movement of translucent wings. Without motion, they remain silent. It was I, for once, who was disturbing *their* peace.

* * *

It's always seemed a bit incongruous to me that the poor housefly carries with it a name related to the one place in which it is least welcome. Then again, where *is* a fly welcome? On a corpse? On rotten, decomposing, unwanted, foul things?

* * *

I pity you, fly, but you are not welcome in my home. If I catch you, I will hold nothing back.

* * *

In my life, I have killed many flies, but only two were struck dead of their own accord—blind, compound-eyed kamikazes careening into unknown caverns, into unforeseen, but certain death. One, into my ear. The other, into my eye.

* * *

When it happened under her watch, my aunt didn't believe that I actually had a fly inside of my ear, but I knew what I heard: the little prick was having a panic attack right on the surface of my earlobe. I can't blame her for not believing me—I had a bit of a reputation as a pathological liar by that point in my life: a little boy known to pull elaborate, convincing stories out of thin air, often to gain an advantage or get out of trouble. Often just for the thrill. Adults were my dupes and I would deadpan a tall tale for anyone willing to listen, unafraid of any consequences that may come of it. The Boy Who Cried Fly.

* * *

I was in my own backyard when a similar tiny impact into my open eye nearly knocked me to my knees. A creature smaller than a split pea died scraping its way into the small cavity at the side of my eye socket. My cornea swelled almost immediately, vitreous fluid seeping out of the wound the insect had carved open. In seconds, my vision went from blurry to black and I feared the very worst as I made my way to the backdoor of the house, calling out to my mother.

* * *

These two incidences didn't happen simultaneously, of course. They were years apart, though how many I can't be sure. Both took place in the summer, the season, in my experience, most fraught with the confusing collision of childhood memories.

* * *

Considering my tendency to stretch the truth, I suppose that it was my own damned fault this fly had me doubled over in pain as it went absolutely apeshit about finding itself lodged inside my ear canal, but that wasn't the point. The point wazzzzztttttt.... the point wazzzzzzttt.... Ack! I can't even think!

* * *

With concern to the swelling eyeball, my mother's reaction, what I could see of it, was swift and decisive. We were on the way to the hospital in minutes. But we lived several miles from the edge of the closest town: an ungodly amount of time for a child with a wild imagination to spend contemplating a life without one eye.

* * *

My father was in the hospital in St. Louis when the fly found its way into my ear canal. He was recovering from an extensive surgery on his back, either his first or second, and my mom was there with him. *She* would have believed me. My Aunt Jan, on the other hand, wasn't having it. She just told me to give it a rest. As if I got some kind of joy from screaming out in pain every time the little bastard made himself known by jackhammering the surface of the most sensitive semi-exposed nerve system of the human body. Such barbarism.

* * *

They held my head down in the emergency room, told me to shut the other eye. Through the open one, I could distinguish only vague hues of light—flickers of yellowish sepia—as the people I could hear talking dripped copious and varied liquids into the

vacant, engorged space where my eye had once been. To my relief, I was told that I would soon be able to see again. In a week.

* * *

Compared to the doctor's quick-handed chemical deluge, my aunt's professional opinion was that I should take a hot, damp washcloth, put it on my ear, and go to bed. If there's something in there, it'll be out by morning if you lay your head on that, she told me, still somehow withholding trust of my story, though I'd been complaining about the maddening buzz for hours by that time of night. I must have really made a fool out of her at some point. Must have told her a real whopper.

* * *

There are a number of years in my childhood where even I have difficulty distinguishing between what stories did and did not take place. What was a fact or an elaborate untruth. Even I sometimes found myself convincing. Over the years, my parents have become accustomed to fielding an innumerable number of questions that begin with, "Did I ever...?".

* * *

I was so excited about the eye patch until I saw it. When we got back to the car, Mom let me have the front seat. She pulled down the sunshade mirror, its dim lights spotlighting my hideous new face. I didn't look a thing like Captain Hook, who I'd been for Halloween just a year or so earlier. I looked like an insect. Like that moth guy from *The Tick*. Or at least half like him: One human eye and one huge, white, gauzy net.

* * *

Though it was difficult to fall asleep on a wet surface with an unwelcome houseguest still fighting away his last moments of life inside of the organ that allows our very conception of silence to exist, eventually I did doze off and in the morning, just as my aunt had promised, there across the still-damp rag lay a tiny, withered corpse. It was a little like getting the middle finger from the Tooth Fairy.

* * *

The eye patch had to be removed and rebandaged daily, an extravagance no true pirate would ever put up with. But I wasn't a pirate, I was an insect. And insects are always interested in the new. A new, unwelcoming space climb into. A new piece of flesh to leech from. A new rotten home to infest with rotten children—broods born to spoil.

* * *

From my makeshift bed on my cousin's floor, I picked up the washcloth and raised the dead fly's carcass up close to my face, lent him a final inspection. One of his wings was broken off; the other, tilted to an unnatural angle. He was missing a few of his legs, but I tried not to consider the implications of this as I flicked his body to the carpet with my finger and went to tell my aunt the good news, not realizing that I had just misplaced the only surviving piece of evidence to my story.

Biting the Bus

Though I was accused, I was never convicted—a lack of evidence, of a criminal record, of even a reasonable motive, all surely played a role in the dismissal of my case, but I will tell you right here and now without fear: I did it.

I bit the back of the bus seats and I liked it.

To clear the air: I didn't need a reason. I didn't hold any ill will against the bus driver (though he was dolt, without question), nor did I relish in my dastardly accomplishment. I wasn't gnawing away at publicly funded upholstery to be "bad"—I just liked the way that it felt. I liked the sensation of the slick, rubbery vinyl between my incisors; the triumph of the fabric pulling free from its metal frame compelled solely by my prepubescent chompers, the wispy cotton that lay beneath it lingering feathery upon my lips like sweet wine after a hard-won battle.

I have always been a chewer. A biter. A generally mouth-y person. So, if you're wondering if this was an isolated incident, or, more aptly, if the idea that this act was reprehensibly unhygienic ever crossed my mind, consider this my unequivocal *no*. Bus-biting (a term I've just coined, thank you) was merely my breakout crime—the first time I took my unique skill-set beyond the confines of my chewed up childhood home.

In a way, we all train for tasks like these from the earliest of ages. Our caretakers pacify us into silence, and we, the resistant, lest our tiny tongues thrust forth like master locksmiths at work, are left to gum away in protest until we exhaust ourselves into defeated slumber. I was no different. But, unlike the rest of you cowards, I adopted my

shackles of pacification like a badge of honor, wearing out binky after wretched binky until even the neighbors began to raise questions about my height and perceived age as they watched me peel away on my flame-decaled Big Wheel, num-num chewy gripped in my defiant little mouth.

When they stripped me of my rubber-and-plastic middle finger to authority, my retaliation was immediate: a plague of toothy terrorism that struck targets both domestic (the corners of side tables, those little wooden brainteasers) and international (remotes and controllers ranging from Sanyo to Sony, from Sega to Nintendo). My bite marks scarred nearly everything I came into contact with, including my thumbs, which I would *gnaw*, not *suckle* like the rest of you schmucks. Those tiny teeth dents were my mark, my legacy, damn it.

But, like most addicts, I got to the point where I couldn't stop, where I couldn't get enough, and eventually I took it too far.

Upon discovery of my handiwork, Amos, the aforementioned bus-driving dolt, was beside himself. One afternoon, shortly into the route, he pulled the bus over and tottered his way up and down the narrow aisle, flinging accusations from seat to seat with his stumpy index finger, red eyes ablaze behind cheap aviator bifocals. Unlucky for him, we were primarily good-natured, slightly country-fried kids, not delinquents, and though our long, yellow flat-nosed vehicle was rarely more than half full, the old dummy had to know that he couldn't finger a perp among those beatific faces free of a guilty conscience.

As for me, I wasn't scared straight facing the sweaty brow of a middle-aged man on his last wits about some missing specks of vinyl. I was just more careful. I chomped

in choice moments, switched seats to throw off the trail. To be clear, it wasn't *me* who sunk the good ship *Fixation Orale*—it was my imitators.

Oh yes, there were copycats, and Amos the dolt was just as responsible for their miscreant behavior as I was. I kept my hobby a secret; he drew a blueprint for a captive audience: *For best results, nibble here*. As expected, at least one among the pint-sized crowd got curious or, perhaps, just plain spiteful. Either way, someone else developed a taste for that sweet, sweet brown polyvinyl and it was they, not I, who ruined it for the rest of us.

I hate to admit it, but a seating chart cut my biting spree short. It was as simple as that. Once the chart was in place, we couldn't get up, couldn't change seats, couldn't sit with our crushes or our friends or even all alone. And we definitely couldn't bite the bus. Daily inspections made sure of that. So, I retired early, no strikes against my name. A suspect, at best, but the case would always be full of holes.

Anyway, there were plenty of other things to chew.

Part 2: Falling in Love With Every Girl I've Ever Met

The Only Ex-Girlfriend I Never Had

The year I got my first boner, I broke it off with my girlfriend of five years. I may be mixing causation with correlation. We were young. Immature. *Underdeveloped*. Perhaps the relationship had simply run its course. Five years is almost a lifetime when you're eight. It's an especially long time to hold down the same monogamous relationship. Things just hadn't been the same between Courtney and me for at least the prior few years. At least since first grade, the last time we'd had the same teacher. Still, something began to wedge between us that year—third grade—the year I got my first hard-on during recess while sitting on a railroad tie for punishment.

In the moment, I didn't know why my typically laid-back Johnson would decide to suddenly become rigid and achy against my elastic waist Wranglers, but I knew from experience that I ought to keep this mystery to myself. I'd learned a few years earlier that when something seemed amiss in Dinkytown, it was best to keep quiet. Unless maybe Mom's around. Tracy, my sixteen-year-old babysitter, taught me that. Her screams still echo in my confused subconscious. To plead my case: when you're a kid, anyone with a little height on them is basically an adult and every female "adult" is essentially Surrogate-Mom. At least that's how I saw it. But, Tracy, it turned out, disagreed. When she opened my bedroom door to see my pitiful little face—willie in hand—I hardly had the time to say, "Something's wrong with my weiner" before she was at the other end of the hallway, horror film shriek in tow. Her younger sister took over as our babysitter from that day forward.

Though Tracy's screaming taught me to keep my mouth shut, back on the playground the...*issue* still stood. The recess bell was going to ring any minute and I had to figure out quick how to draw attention away from the fact that a certain, sensitive part of my body seemed to be trying to climb out of my pants and have a look around. As far as I could tell, without medical intervention, this unnerving peen-pressure would be life from now on—*Was I going to need to get new pants?* Part of me was okay with that. I mean, in a way, whatever was happening down there felt pretty damn good. But at the moment my primary concern was to avoid looking like I was trying to smuggle some sort of playground contraband down the front of my pants back into Mrs. Ebersole's classroom.

* * *

Courtney and I had a low-key, low-maintenance kind of romance. A bit on-again/off-again, even: a relationship we seemed to find ourselves in without realizing it; that we fell out of in much the same way. We'd first met in daycare when we were four. I can remember falling for her, though how we became an item, I can't say. There was just something about a girl who could convince her best friend to be a dog for an entire afternoon that just did it for me, I guess.

But, not disregarding that obviously tenuous connection, my and Courtney's relationship might have been doomed further back than either of us cared to realize or even had the mental cognizance to grasp. It might have been set on a downward spiral as soon as we first stepped foot inside O'Neal Elementary.

Were there a precedent, I'd have to think that this is the way long-term prepubescent commitment works. Or, rather, falls apart. You both start school, get put in

different classrooms, and sure, you might see each other on the playground, might give a little wave, might meet eyes then look away amid one cluster of friends or another, but in four academic quarters, let alone six or seven, not discounting summers, so much can change in a couple. People grow apart. Attention spans wane. Things begin to grow in places where things did not used to grow. New prospects come to light.

* * *

Given the limitations of the disciplinary system and the size of our school (three teachers for each grade level), it's possible that Jessica Grable and I had, at least a year prior to our first real encounter, matched hesitant glances as we waited outside our respective classroom doors for our teachers to come out and do everything short of take the timber to our bare asses. It's feasible that we'd exchanged a few words as we sat astride "The Wall" for punishment during recess. It's entirely plausible that she'd scowled at me with eyes like shattered glass from a few seats away in the lobby of Principal Sandlin's office late one afternoon. These scenes certainly *feel* like they happened, but I can't be sure. There weren't many truly *bad* kids at O'Neal Elementary and the justifiable punishments for "general misconduct and/or disrespect" could be counted on a few fingers. Plus, from my experience, even in its most innocuous forms, delinquency is strangely magnetic.

But sometimes magnets need a bit of a push to come together. When Jessica and I both ended up in her classroom that year, Mrs. Ebersole was happy to oblige. Somewhere in the hellscape that lay beneath her ridiculous beehive perm, Ebersole decided that the cure for my constant in-class wise-assery and Jessica's tendency to just be a pain in the

ass was to make she and I desk partners. I think her hope was that we would exhaust or annoy each other into submission. Hers was diamond-tipped plan.

For the next few months, there was a near-nightly conversation between my mom and I about the awfulness that was Jessica Grable:

“She never shuts up! She just talks! It’s like, “No one’s even listening, Jessica!” How am I supposed to get any work done if she won’t be quiet?!”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sweetie. She sounds difficult.”

Mom—always playing it coy. A real long-game player.

“She *is* difficult. I can’t even think with her sitting there going blahblahblahblahblah...”

Insert empathetic nodding where necessary.

“Uh huh. I’m sure that’s hard, baby.”

“It *is*!”

A pause for emphasis.

“Matthew, does Jessica remind you of anyone...?”

The pointed lob. Classic Mom.

“What? No! Why?”

Swing and a miss.

“Well, do you think there might be a reason that Mrs. Ebersole sat Jessica right next to you?”

This one’s right in the pocket.

“I don’t think so, Mom. Mrs. Ebersole’s an old lady. Who knows why she does anything that she does.”

Whiff.

* * *

Third grade was also the year I discovered pop music in earnest, the year I started sneaking extended peeks at MTV whenever my parents stepped out of the family room. Sometime that fall, I learned a new term while watching the MTV Video Music Awards. In his acceptance speech for winning an iconic Moon Man statuette for “Getting Jiggy Wit It,” Will Smith thanked his parents for “being horny that night.” I’d never been so captivated and mystified by sheer language in all of my life.

The rest of the program fell silent as I replayed the moment in my head over and over, trying to scrape together every bit of context I could to make the meaning of this strange new word come to light. My thought process went something like this: Smith was thanking his parents for something they were or did one night that, in its own way, landed him the award he held in his hand. One night. Sex happened at night and, somehow, sex caused babies. Will Smith was once a baby. Therefore, Smith was thanking his parents for having sex. *But what did horns have to do with sex? Did women have horns? Did men?*

These questions continued to plague me well into the next day until I finally got up the nerve to ask my best friend, Bobby, about it while sitting on the railroad tie at recess.

“Did you watch that show on MTV last night? The one where they give out the trophies?” I began slyly enough.

“No. Why?” he asked.

“Do you know what ‘horny’ means?”

Subtlety is time-consuming. Recess is only a few minutes long.

Bobby didn't know either. Like me, he'd never even heard the word, but we both agreed that it definitely had something to do with sex. The issue was that neither of us knew what exactly went into the act of sex, itself. We knew that there was a man and a woman and they were naked on top of each other and, supposedly, it felt good. There were plenty of songs on the radio to attest to these facts. Beyond this, we had only the universal hand signal to consult—the gesture passed down for millennia from one big kid to his little brother and from this little brother to his friends: an index finger poking into an open fist.

For what seemed like several minutes, the two of us each held our own set of instruments—a pointer and a keyhole—and studied them together and apart: poking, withdrawing, and inspecting until one of us was finally brave enough to ask: “Has your wiener ever gotten hard all of the sudden?” This. This was the answer.

“Sure, I guess,” the other answered hesitantly, though the very question itself implied that the asker had himself experienced an unwarranted stiffening in his dungarees.

“Well, maybe that's the horn, you know?”

The logic was flawless.

“Yeah! But wait. Where's the woman's horn?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, how could his parents 'be horny' if his mom didn't have a horn, too?”

Our eyebrows wrenched and we fell silent. We looked down at our hands but for now they held no further answers.

* * *

For the two or three years prior to third grade, the only reason I'd ever hear from Courtney was to validate or invalidate our hazy courtship. At the beginning of each fall semester, one of her friends would approach me on the playground and ask, "Do you still like Courtney?" and if I said, "yes," she'd reply, "Ok! You're still boyfriend/girlfriend."

I always said "yes."

In early elementary, no one comes back from summer vacation with a significant other already in the bag. That's unheard of. I had it made and I knew it. It's called a safety net for a reason: it's safe. Guaranteed. Even if you feel like crawling off of the thing, the fall to the floor is maybe a few feet. The initial drop is much more terrifying.

* * *

One of Jessica Grable's most egregious boundary-crossing moments was her refusal to relinquish the idea that maybe—just maybe—a dog might have *actually* eaten my homework. Of course, even at age eight I knew that the very notion of this claim was cliché as all get out, but that didn't change the facts: My handwriting workbook was kaput. The muddy paw prints were not counterfeit. The teeth marks were not my own. And sure, I'd blown off easier assignments than handwriting homework—coloring? I've got better things to do—but the sheer attention to detail and effort that it would have taken me to render my handwriting book so unsightly—come on, now. But Jessica wouldn't let it go. She brought it up over and over again throughout the day: intermittent idiot-baby-voiced exclamations of, "My doggie ated it teach-uw" followed by her horrendous and solitary cackling.

Bobby would have come to my defense, but he was at least fifteen, maybe twenty feet away. An impossible distance. And even though I had brought the shredded workbook with me to school that day as evidence, even though no one was laughing about it except Jessica, I was mortified. Ashamed. But I didn't lash out at Jessica. I just hid my head. I've never been very confrontational.

* * *

As the weeks went by, I began to hate Jessica less and less. I wouldn't have called us friends by any stretch, but I had started to glean a bit about her that softened my opinion. I learned that she was an only child of a single mom who always seemed frantic and bug-eyed when she came to school to talk/yell on Jessica's behalf. I also noticed that Jessica didn't really seem to have any friends, which was sad even if she was a little tough to be around sometimes.

Then, everything changed. I found out the true power that a new hairdo could wield against the fluctuating levels of testosterone within my prepubescent body.

The Day of the New Haircut was the first time my eyes lingered upon the beauty of the feminine form and it was as if The Girl With the New Haircut somehow knew that. Softly, subtly, she touched the eraser of her #2 pencil to her now noticeably plump, supple lips, fluttering her lashes—suddenly full and dark and thick along seductively drooping eyelids—as she watched Mrs. Ebersole review the most recent spelling test, a wealth of charming, intelligent thought beneath those shimmering brunette locks.

The New Haircut was the obvious centerpiece of this display and The Girl did everything in her power to flaunt it: touching and tucking, twirling and teasing. It was maddening. She had to know what she was doing. Had to know that, if not just me,

someone was watching her do these things. Surely these behaviors hadn't been going on all year while I sat just a few feet away. Surely a few inches less hair couldn't turn an unquestionably awful human being into a complete and utter babe—a *woman*—overnight.

Yet, there she was, Jessica Grable: *new*. In my head, even the sound and connotation of her name seemed to change from something like, “Aw, man!” to a sing-songy nonsense, the very thought of which made my insides melt into a hot liquid love mush. This unbridled mush-flood coursed through every inch of me, a devastating torrent of saccharine, sickly sweetness I feared might force me some moment soon to render my guts into the wastebasket by the classroom door. My fingertips tingled, begged to touch her lips, her hair, her t-shirt, *anything*. My legs shook beneath my desk. I felt itchy and warm and completely focused on the holy overwhelming beauty of the one girl just days, hours, minutes before I had absolutely despised. I was *horny* for Jessica Grable.

The obvious conflict of interest here wasn't the only problem. I also had a girlfriend. At least I thought I did. Either way, it felt like good form to make sure before things went any further with Jessica.

But, Courtney had already moved on. When I went to track her down on the playground, it soon became apparent that a Mr. Eric Nelson was her new beau and my feelings on the subject were the least of her concern. I don't think we even had to have a conversation. There were obvious signs that tetherball wasn't the only game those two were playing.

I asked Jessica to be my girlfriend on the way to the bus at the end of the last day of school that year. This way, I figured, if she rejects me, *see you next year!* I was and

was not surprised when she shouted an emphatic “OK!” just before the crowd of bus kids began to put distance between us. Still, we lingered in the O’Neal bus lot for a moment, grinning like idiots, before we parted ways. *Next year*, we spoke without words.

But after that moment in the bus lot, I never saw Jessica Grable again. She and her mom moved away sometime that summer and no one at school knew where to or seemed really to care.

Sometimes, I wonder if Jessica and I are technically still together. Or if we ever were in the first place. I wonder if you have to say or write or do something for a relationship to come to a close, even one that was never really allowed to begin. I wonder if she hadn’t moved away if Jessica would’ve come up to me at the beginning of the next school year to ask if I still wanted to be with her. If we would’ve spoken to each other at all.

The Art of Covertly Holding Hands

The first time I held hands was in front of an audience. Donna and I were in love—if not then, soon—but physical contact between the two of us still required a dare or even a command. Ours was a just-budding relationship—this was only our second or third time sharing a bus seat, a big step for two kids fresh across the milestone of double-digit age—and this time we'd taken a seat near the back by the older kids: mammoth eighth graders, high schoolers still too young or broke to drive to school. Greasy pimple-bags who told dirty jokes and passed cigarettes until their redolent stink made its way up to the driver's seat.

I wouldn't have been sitting back there if Donna hadn't asked me. Not that I was scared of the older kids, I just didn't want to catch any shit, which, once you passed the fifth seat from the emergency exit, was inevitable if you were still shy of five feet. But Donna was mature for her age. She may have worn hand-me-down dresses and a homemade haircut, but she had wit and brains and a lethally filthy mouth. She had a revolving door of smutty pulp novels she'd read aloud to me until I was flushed and queasy; a sweet-but-takes-no-bullshit composure that still defines my very conception of the word "sexy." A cool older sister brave enough to show up to school in corpse paint and a dog collar. I would've followed that gap-toothed grin right off the Black River Bridge.

The older kids leaned over into our seat, teased and cajoled us into submission.

You like her, don't you?

Come on! Just do it!

I can't even believe this, man. This is some baby bullshit.

So cute!

Go for it, little dude!

As I extended my hand, I didn't look Donna in the face, not knowing that this would become a lifelong signature "move" of mine—a maneuver I would employ time and again, well beyond adolescence. An action that I would argue is far more satisfying, subtle, and results-producing than any of that "yawn-my-arm-around-you" nonsense. Certainly more effective than your average dick pic.

Covert handholding is a fully formed dialogue in silence, unseen. It's a conversation that says as much or as little as is required; that communicates, at very least, "Clasping your hand under these specific circumstances is acceptable." The remaining complications can be figured out later. Or not. What matters is that, for this moment, you and another desirable human being are ping-ponging fluttered heartbeats between pressed palms, are sharing comingled sweat and a secret. What matters is that neither of you can concentrate on anything save that unspeakably tense feeling of risk and possibility, the thought that nothing or everything could spark from this small, hidden moment.

On the bus, the others looked on, oohed and awed and 'atta boyed, then quickly lost interest. Donna and I sat in silence on the bench seat: she, looking vaguely out of the window, and I, at my shoes or across the aisle. At moments, each of us would steal a glance at our two clasped, perspiring hands, but we never met eyes. A few minutes later, we broke free, drying our palms on our pant legs. After that, neither she nor I had the guts to offer or ask to reconvene. We couldn't even speak.

I passed Donna a note during free reading period a few weeks later: a drawing of the universal hand sign of thumb, pointer, and pinky. Next to the drawing, in poorly translated Italian, I'd written, "I love you."

She looked closely at the little etching, but, of course, had no idea what it said. She couldn't even make out the symbol of the hand.

I Would Pill for Love

I can still recall the soft, inviting quality of that one half-inch of Brooke Johnson's North Face fleece. How it cascaded over the back of her cerulean plastic chair and just *spilled* down onto my workspace, somehow connecting without connecting Brooke and me in an unspoken gesture of secret lust; her fleece, mere centimeters away, begging my index finger, *touch me, you shit. Coarse your aching fingers through my every pillowy fiber. Love me like you love the backside of Brooke's seventh grade bob.* And when I did, my god, the ecstasy. The tingling sensation that outright disintegrated me into all matter of atomic detritus. A few months after this moment, in my last preteen December, I kissed a girl whose legal name was Jerrie Lee Lewis at a screening of *The World Is Not Enough*—it paled in comparison to this bit of finger-to-fleece copulation.

Brooke Johnson wasn't my first redhead—that was Krista May, who wouldn't even peck me on the cheek until my best friend, Anthony, threw her a barter-smooch one afternoon when a game of kissing took over the playground at daycare. But Brooke was the first with any heft of the many pale, freckle-blotted young women I would pursue without success well, *well* beyond my adolescent years. There was also Amanda, the band camp beauty who liked me for a year but lost interest after I violated her spiritual purity by stroking my finger across the ankle she enticingly laid across my lap. Allison, the Hot Topic-chic emo chick, the first girl who truly broke my heart and who did so only minutes after I—in a less-than-coy gesture of romance—threw at her balcony door the rubber Gumby toy I carried around in my pocket junior year in an attempt to be

memorable or unique or likely the same reason I worked on a Spiderman coloring book instead of paying attention in science class. Weirdness was endearing, I think I thought.

For a brief moment in time, I was giving that navy fleece the most hesitantly tender, nearly inert rubdown of its inanimate life. The back edge of my index finger just slightly more than motionless all over those luscious pilings of woven polyester—the culmination of so many of that semester’s near-transcendent moments. Every, “Here, I think this is yours.” Every amorous, fixated gaze-off shared between my baby blues and the burst of gold-tainted crimson that hung to the middle of the neck Brooke craned to talk to her friend who sat at the desk to my right.

In my life, there are few pieces of light outerwear that have meant more to me.

It would be a lie for me to say that there were not shallow breaths of time in which this fleece-fondling behavior struck me as a touch uncouth. But these were flighty thoughts, flickers quickly quashed out by the tiny hopeful possibility that just maybe Brooke *could* feel what I was doing and was simply playing it cool, hamming it up for Mrs. Davis, already deep into her daily diatribe about Persephone or Perseus or Polyamorous or Psomebody. I placed my foot in an exaggerated point beneath Brooke’s seat, just in case. Sustained foot-to-foot contact was all the answer I would need from her: a sole-seal for our burgeoning devotion toward one another. When she sort of *kicked*, rather than adoringly scraped along the edge of my Airwalks, I gave her the benefit of the doubt. Accidents happen. At least after this inadvertent punting she would know that my foot was there, waiting for hers whenever she was ready. For pubescent boys between the ages of eleven and dead, the cues of love are often subtle, if not utterly

invisible. To accurately read between the lines of social propriety and decorum for that little spark of somethin'-somethin' requires patience. Planning. Persistence.

Yet “What are you doing?” is rarely a sturdy bridge toward a well-fated romantic rendezvous. Rather, it tends to burn that mother down in the very worst way. The look of confused disgust on Brooke’s face in that moment—the moment she wheeled around and spouted that hate-sopped phrase—will never leave me. Nor will the echo of my stammered, “Uh, uh, uh, nothing!” That’s the stuff that haunts you. The stuff that you look back on and realize what baby steps you’ve made in terms of silver-tongued charisma since age twelve. The stuff that solidifies the notion that somewhere not so deep inside you are still that same bowl-cut-bearing schmuck trying to sneak a rub on a hot girl’s jacket. That you’ve got no game, son.

At least not with redheads.

Mouthpiece

The year I learned to play trombone was the year that my brain began to trickle down into my scrotum—the year I learned to conjure something new from within my body. It’s difficult to think of another life discovery simultaneously as pleasurable and shame inducing as this. I have battled against this unconscious leak of consciousness ever since I became conscious of it (read: not soon enough).

I played the trombone for three years—seventh to ninth grade—which I can certify is the worst time to lug around an instrument case that looks like a giant black dildo. Making my way down the narrow aisle of the school bus, I had to carry the case between my legs, the wide base of the horn’s bell resting on my crotch and three feet of hard black cylinder thrusting out before me. It bobbed with my movements, dry humping the musty air of pubescent breath and body odor. “Is that your trumpet?” a fellow passenger would almost always ask, forcing me into the same unwanted conversation again and again. “No, it’s a trombone,” I’d say, knowing that any moment—“HUH! TromBONER!” Ah, yes. You got me. Good one.

In junior high school, my sexual imagination was still firmly intact, my fantasies a revolving door of the same few characters in the same few locales, all within the confines of PBJHS. These were underused, often unoccupied rooms with windowless doors that could be locked without suspicion. The choir room. The science lab. The band closet and rehearsal studios. There was a enormous sense of risk involved in these fantasies, especially considering their complete disconnect from any semblance of reality: the thrill

of getting caught fucking when all you know of fucking is an image you've surmised of a bouncing female, her head tipped back in ecstasy, your cock consumed by something mythic and incomprehensibly good-feeling, and in the air the most raw sensation of love.

In the summer after seventh grade, I learned the sinister possibilities inherent in my burgeoning sexuality. In a vacant closet, alone, I learned that sexual violence could be wrought upon someone against her will and without her knowledge. That violence could be silent, unseen, and physical even without human contact. That an act of violence could be so absurd that one might find it difficult not to laugh, yet this does not make it funny.

In the opening passage of an essay focused on the appendage, novelist Ron Carlson calls the dick "the axis of planet earth" and "the axle in the big wheel of desire and regret" and "the first radical pillar of society," among other things. One would like to say that he is exaggerating for effect.

My junior high fantasies almost always consisted of finding myself alone with a crush only to discover that her desire for me, like mine for her, was irrepressible, had been just waiting for an opportune moment to be unleashed. The girls were always in control, always knew what they were doing, their passion unfettered and uncontainable. I could only succumb to their will and keep an eye on the door. E, a girl I had known since middle school, a girl I had dated off and on, whom I saw every day across the room in band class, was a common fix.

My first attempt to stifle my leaking brain was with a hefty wad of Christian chastity. To curb my constant desire to mate with my surroundings, I absorbed myself into the Southern Baptist church my family attended, actively participating in every youth service, event, retreat, camp, performance, mission, and any combination thereof. For a

traveling musical, my friends and I donned sunglasses and posed in mock-Fonzie for an upbeat ska number about keeping our eyes focused on pure things and “shading” ourselves from the temptations of the world. In another, we acted out skits that seemed to posit that any and every night of drunken revelry would, without exception, result in bringing an unwanted child into this wretched, sinful world: a dramatic cut scene in one’s life that transitions from stage lights dimming as a blanket swallows you and your unlucky partner for the evening to the lights’ garish and bright return the following morning and you, now alone in the same bed, miming the sleep from your eyes as the girl you shook the sheets with the night before enters the room in melodramatic tears to tell you, “Johnny, I’m pregnant.” Depending on the particulars of the given show, a few scenes later the two of you might suffer a fatal car crash, then be judged by a towering faceless figure in a cloak, nodding its head along to a voiceover that declares you both unfit for the gates of heaven, the cue for a pair of demons to leap from the shadows and drag you and your one-night stand away screaming as the audience looks on, contemplating their own sin and their sudden strong desire to avoid being hauled off by creatures a hundred times more disturbing than Kit and Curtis in their cheap Halloween costumes. In Fake Hell, people screamed and pounded upon the walls. The air reeked of burnt hair. Many souls were scared, I mean saved, each night.

The year before I entered junior high, my last year of recess, I briefly had a girlfriend named Cassie, a friend of E’s, who, on occasion, I would walk laps with around the border of the playground. But, more often than not, we would only speak to one another through a mutual friend messaging system. “Cassie thinks you look cute today,” Johanna would tell me and my reply would be something along the line of, “Thank you?”

That is, unless one of the messengers coached me as to what a girl would actually want to hear. Given the way our relationship came to an end, I get the feeling that the messengers would return to Cassie with the full rundown of their interaction with me, not just the agreed upon script. “Matt said, ‘Oh, cool,’ then just kind of stared at me. I told him to say something nice about your hair or your outfit and he said, ‘Like what?’ and I said, ‘Anything you notice about her that you like,’ and he said, ‘Her hair does look less poofy today, I guess.’ I told him he was hopeless and that I would just make something up.” I have never been the most eloquent orator.

I can’t single out a major incident that brought it on, but I somehow knew that the break-up with Cassie was imminent. Still, I had no idea of the spectacle that was to come. As she made her march toward me from across the playground, every sixth grade girl in Cassie’s path was latched magnetically to her growing mass of ponytails and sour grimaces. They may as well have had pitchforks and torches. I was their monster, another stupid boy no different than any other stupid boy who deserved to be tarred, feathered, and put in the stocks to send a message. I stood alone, the sheer mass of them heading in my direction—maybe ten to fifteen deep, though it seemed like many more at the time—enough to make my innards shrivel up, my voice crack in fear. I knew what I had to do. I couldn’t go out like this. There was no justice here. Soon, they surrounded me, seemed to push me toward her. Cassie scowled from beneath her black-rimmed specs, but didn’t yet speak. If these were boys, they would have spread out, given us room to exchange blows, chanted *fight, fight*, but the mob of girls pressed in close, not wanting to miss a word between us, whispered *do it, Cassie, do it* until she did. My reply, “You can’t break up with me! I’m breaking up with you!” did not go over well. The crowd fell back in

audible groans, shaking heads and shouting jeers—disgusted at my cowardice, my inability to accept my fate.

Though my attendance at First Baptist remained steady, unambiguous abstinence proved a much more difficult habit to hold myself to. For an adolescent body so deeply “under the spell of his penis,” to paraphrase Carlson, adherence to the stifflingly straight and impossibly narrow path did little more than consume me with an impossible sense of guilt. The idea that a perfect being was observing and judging my every move and action was simply too much. It didn’t matter if He was endlessly forgiving; to earn forgiveness, one had to confess, one had to tell God night after night, “I did it again.”

The next recess after the breakup, E sent me a message through a girl named Johanna who wore ankle-length skirts and Pentecostal hair, “E says you’re a skank for trying to break up with Cassie.” My nerve endings crackled and sparked. I had already been dumped, had already been ridiculed by a mob of girls I knew and girls I did not know. I was obviously beaten and E, another ex-girlfriend, was coming in for one last jab to my ribs. “Yeah?” I said, “Well, she’s a slut! Tell her I said that!”

When E called me a skank, I didn’t truly feel it. I only knew that I had been further insulted, further shamed by a member of Cassie’s mob. I knew that I would look weak if I didn’t try to shame her back. From across the playground, I watched as Johanna told E what I had said, watched E’s body go stiff, then crumble into her friend. I watched as other girls came running up to her, who could tell from a distance like I could that E was more than just upset. I watched their hands come to her shoulder. Watched them lead her away from where the word had hit. I watched as E sat with her friends along the side of the building with her head in her hands. For me, being called a “skank”—a word I

wasn't certain I even knew the meaning of—was easy to brush off, hard to connect to any element of my personality, any action of my body that may have been a source of constant shame. I didn't yet know it, but for E, the word “slut” was already something of a brand.

Here is the story: The summer after seventh grade, I spent a lot of time alone on campus. I was enrolled in summer school—private drum lessons and a jazz ensemble populated with rising freshmen—but the program was loose. There was always dead time to wander through the halls between one class and another. One afternoon in the time between my private lessons and when the rest of the ensemble of older kids would begin to arrive, I wandered into the band closet for no particular reason other than to pass the time alone staring at all of the bulky cases of instruments that I would never learn to play. Many of these instruments were stored in this small room for the summer by students who weren't keen on practicing or whose parents weren't keen on noise. Each case had a luggage tag and after a time I began to pass down the line, taking note of the names of friends and acquaintances, calling up mental images, faces to match the inanimate things, I suppose in a way to make myself feel less alone. When I saw her nametag, my stomach stirred. There was nothing distinguishable about E's trumpet case other than the idea that it was hers, that she had handled it, that it had been intimately close to her. I placed my hands upon the case, my heartbeat racing as I flipped the latches to open it. The inside was deep red velvet. I picked up the horn to clasp where E would clasp, but I didn't hold it for long. Something else caught my eye: her mouthpiece. Though we had dated twice for short periods, E and I had never kissed, and here within reach was an object that had been pressed to her lips alone for an incalculable amount of time. I thought that I had to.

But placing my lips upon the small sterling silver cup only amplified my desire for more. I had been in the closet alone for several minutes and hadn't heard an inkling of another human presence in the entire building. It would only take a moment. I just wanted to see what it would feel like.

I remember the first day back at school, the first band class of the year, when, as I often did, I watched E from across the room instead of looking at my music and I noticed how her lips—because she hadn't practiced through the summer—had swollen purple from being pressed against her mouthpiece. Somehow, seeing that puffy, round discoloration on E's lips—lips I had longed to kiss for as long as I'd been interested in kissing—I lost the last of any belief I had left that I'd made some kind of romantic contact through that brief, brainless moment in the closet that summer. Instead, as I looked at E from across what now seemed a growing distance, her oblivious eyes fixed solely on the music laid in front of her, I could only sense that something lost that could not be recovered was echoing out in reverberated air.

Part 3: Animals for Houses

dots on the back of our home

when the lady bugs will come, we can't say, nor how many, what year. only that when they do our home will just get sick, like ivy has put a rash of red dots upon her skin. red dots that dig, stir, and mass 'til each side of her is sore and soft and born into. 'til they line her in and out with the dead.

* * *

when the lady bugs come, dad will say, "we'll just have to wait them out," so we'll wait. we won't yet know, as he does, the hard knot tied up by time and loss of life. how *all will come to pass*. once a week or when dad says to, we'll wipe or suck the dead lump of red skin from each sill. the odor of it will not make us fuss. we will not dare. "bugs move on or die off," dad will say. or "they won't too last long." or "ah, we'll live."

* * *

a lady bug is not a bug. not a true bug. not even kin. away, over the sea, some call them a "lady bird" or even a "lady cow." lady bugs bear the term "lady" from mary, "our lady," who, some say, wore red upon her back. the myth goes that a lady bug has one spot for each key hour of joy held by our lady and one spot, the same spot, to mark a time when she felt true pain: each dark blot upon each red back for a mom who bore a hero that had to die.

* * *

when the lady bugs don't move on or die off, dad will get a can of kill, a hose. mom will not have this shit. she will say it to his face, will not care if we kids can hear. the odor of

the dead will be too much for her. in our home, she will feel less than pure. the bugs, like us kids, like dad, will edge into her skin. will bore gaps into her.

* * *

lady bugs are said to be “good” for what they eat: *bad* bugs. so one may kill some of them, but not too many—it is not “good” to do this. in a time of fear, the red bugs that are not bugs emit a foul ooze the tint of yolk. they make reek and ruin as they fall dead. in the wake of this, mom will toss each of our pale rugs into the big can out back, will tell me or dad, “just burn them.”

* * *

my old room on the warm side of our home, the side that gets the best sun—the one the lady bugs love as a rule—will reek most foul of all. at the base of the far wall will be an inch high hill of red we will do our best to hold back but fail and fail ‘til we just shut the door and keep it that way. let the bugs heap up. let the odor of them—like old dirt, like rot—seep into the hall, into mom and dad’s room. let our life be rank with them.

* * *

some call them the “good luck bug,” but not us kids. not mom and dad. good luck is not a pile of dead. good luck is not a musk you lug upon your back even when your home is not near. good luck does not turn up the nose of your teen love, the love with whom you sit in your old room and try to hold and kiss and feel in the dark—the love, laid on her back, that says, “yuck. what is that?,” a new fold made into her brow. too much good luck is just bad luck, is like a love only you feel is true.

* * *

even when the lady bugs are gone, they will not be gone. we will find dead red dots for more than a year. dead who seem to hide from us. who bear that rank odor like it's some kind of duty. who let us know we will not ever win. when we move away, our home, my old room will teem with them. no mask will be able to blot the reek out. no vile dose will keep the bugs that are not bugs away the next year or the next. they, not us, are what our home will hold onto.

* * *

for lady bugs, to live and to die is to sing in olid odor: to make a mist to call a mate or cry out to kith and kin, "come. we are here. it is warm. we are safe." to say to a bird, "do not eat my kind. we are not good food," or, when dead, "here lies... let her be." lady bugs do not need words to stay warm, to make or to find love, to be free from harm. they only need a home. *our* home. and they can have it.

Disappearing Dogs

From the battered blacktop highway, we cannot be seen. Ours is a hidden home. Tucked between three massive, forested slopes, one of only a handful of houses on this desolate country road. When the sun falls, there is a wild silence in these hills. That, or the too-close wailing of coyotes. At midnight and again at three, they yelp and cry as trains whistle from the other side of Black River, its swift currents concealed by the deep stretch of open pasture opposite our driveway. More than once I have burst awake to shrieks from the high shadows outside my bedroom window. Nightmare sounds—the otherworldly screech of a panther like murder amid the darkness. Our dogs bay in the yard until they are shouted down. In the midst of these shocks from the night, they learn to keep quiet.

Sometimes, we wake up and the dogs are gone.

* * *

My parents never liked living inside city limits. Neighbors always too close. Too many eyes in one's business. They wanted stillness. Privacy. Freedom from daylight solicitors and lock checks in the middle of the night. Safety in isolation.

My sister and I were ten and eight, respectively, when we were dragged away from playing under amber streetlamps and in the backyards of other kids our ages in small town southeast Missouri, only to be dropped at the midpoint of a winding road of scattered, distant houses and woods and woods and woods. A road that, rather than end, became gravel just as one passed a bankrupt campground strewn with boarded-up,

abandoned cabins and buckshot “No Trespassing” signs. There, we had one set of neighbors: a balding, older man most comfortable in a tank top and suspenders, his ever-permed wife, and their young, athletic son, all who lived in a tall A-frame concealed from sight by the top of our east hill. The old man was the part-time pastor of a little Southern Baptist church just down the road that, from the look of the place driving by on Sunday mornings, only he and his immediate family attended.

When we moved out to the country, our dogs, Patch and Lucky, came with us. They might have even been a small motivation for the move. We’d raised them up from puppies, mutts born of my grandmother’s cocker spaniel, Casey; their father an English Setter speckled in black and white who roamed across cornfields to spread and abandon his seed. When the litter arrived, my grandmother called my mom to pawn a few off before things got out of hand and, as it goes with puppies and children, Alicia and I fell in love with the whole lot on sight—our very own set of *101 Dalmatians*. Graciously, we offered to take on the whole peach crate of pups, but our parents limited our selection to two. We chose the ones who chose us: two incessant tongue-lashers, whom we named after our favorite *Dalmations*: Patch, primarily white but some, well, *patches* of black around his ears and eyes, and Lucky, whose entire head was solid coal; his body white, but ink-blotted. We took them home to our one-story bungalow on South Avondale, where they quickly outgrew the pen my dad had built for them in our perfectly square backyard. We packed them up and skipped town soon thereafter.

The pups thrived in their newfound freedom. They’d wander into the wilderness for hours at a time, returning as white blurs that bounded down the leaf-strewn hills when we whistled or called them by name. Their long hair quickly became mangy and matted,

strung with briars and tagalongs, deer ticks swelling beneath their undercoats—a pain to brush or maintain, but the pair were never happier. Despite the span of their adventures, though, there wasn't a weekday afternoon when the two brothers could not be found waiting patiently at the end of our buckling asphalt driveway for my sister and I to be dropped off by the school bus. The very definition of loyalty.

We loved the boys. Perhaps a bit less once they had outgrown their puppy phase. Maybe a smaller amount when, over the course of a few months, they devolved into creatures more feral than domesticated. When they transformed from unbearably cute to unbearably filthy. But, they were consistent. Always sweet natured and relatively well behaved—at least Lucky was. Regardless, as Dad would put it, they were our dogs, whether we liked them or not.

Our dogless neighbors on the hill, perhaps out of envy or as a response to Patch and Lucky's often overzealous sense of freedom that paid no mind to established borders of property, soon bought themselves a pair of puppies: a German Shepherd they named Emmitt for the infamous Dallas Cowboy and a Chow Chow—a black-tongued bear of a breed—they called Chewy. Each of these breeds are known to be overly protective of their owners, especially if not properly socialized. A German Shepherd, in particular, is commonly known to bite individuals that it finds unfamiliar or threatening—the reason they get such heavy use by the police. Shepherds also have a reputation for attacking smaller breeds of dog.

My mother took these breed selections as an act of neighborly aggression from the very start.

* * *

Soon, our country home became known as something of a refuge for unwanted animals. My aunt's black Labrador, Sam, was suddenly too large to keep at her college apartment. My mom's work friend was "forced" to offload her annoyingly skittish Pomeranian, Sassy, who would come only to my sister and only when coaxed at length. My grandmother, somewhat fickle by nature, decided she "just didn't feel like having a dog anymore," so Patch and Lucky briefly found themselves reunited with their cocker spaniel mother, Casey. *Briefly.*

The wild pack soon became unwieldy. We tried putting Patch—by now the most unruly and difficult to handle—in a pen, but he barked and yelped at the injustice of it all, watching his mother and brother roam freely about the yard. Then, we traded him out for Sassy, thinking, I guess, that at least in a cage you could grab her up if necessary and, being the smallest of the bunch, she was probably safer in there, anyway. But we never found the right dynamic. Caged, the smaller dogs, Casey and Sassy, were just quiet and depressing, whereas, the larger breeds would just *lose it*. Despite all of this effort, no one in the family was really engaging with the dogs—they mainly acted as décor for the wooded life. My sister and I, at least, were much more interested in what was on TV, indoors, in the air conditioning, than we were with that mess of hounds outside. We let them be wild and wild they became. It was enough to give them an indifferent "Hey" and a pat on the head when we got home.

Because he was the kindest and most marketable of the brood, my parent's decided to give Lucky away to another family and my sister, his rightful owner, didn't really seem to mind. We passed his new home every afternoon on our bus route and often we'd see him running around or lazing about a lush green field that he shared with

several horses and a couple of cows. It seemed an idyllic, deserved life for such a sweet boy.

With Lucky gone, Patch decided to stake his claim to seniority over the rest of the new arrivals. He would eat their food when they weren't looking, would nearly knock over me or the other members of my family if we tried to show affection to another dog. From the way he acted, Patch was either lovesick or starved. The problem was that he revealed his emotional turmoil with brute force. With teeth and with claws. I tried just to ignore his behavior, figuring that it was just a phase, a warranted adjustment period, considering the recent loss of his brother and lifelong companion. I had no idea that my parents were exchanging whispers, concocting solutions to the problem at night while in their bed.

* * *

Some time after we gave up Lucky, we found the limp body of Casey, his mother, beneath our small grove of apple trees in the front field of our property, blood peering out of punctures wounds at her throat and abdomen. Patch, of course, was a suspect, but only for a moment. He'd become mean, sure. He might nip at Sam, the Lab, should he go in for a bite to eat from the wrong food bowl, but surely Patch didn't have it in him to *kill*. Walking our eyes up the hill east of the apple field, the German Shepherd and Chow Chow could be seen hovering near their home, pacing in intimidating circles. My mother's eyes went bloodshot.

Mom called over to confront the neighbors about the incident, but the old preacher just denied and denied. He wondered why one of our dogs couldn't be to blame for Casey's death, or why not a fox or a coyote. "She wasn't a big dog," he said. "It

wouldn't take much." As with the ongoing dispute about the long-vacant horse barn and fence he had built on our side of the property line years before we moved in after a handshake agreement with the previous owner, he wouldn't give an inch of leeway or shoulder any portion of the blame. He was sorry that our dog was dead, that was all. Luckily, we weren't a gun family.

* * *

Not long after Casey was buried in the woods behind the house, I got off of the school bus, weary from the hour-long ride, and Patch wasn't there to greet me. I called and whistled for him as I made my way up the lengthy drive, but there was no response. No sound of leaves being scattered under thunderous feet. *He must be far out there*, I thought, and came back out a few hours later to lend him another unanswered call.

"He'll probably come back some time tonight or early tomorrow," my parents told me, "He's wandered off before like this. Don't worry about it too much."

Months passed. The remaining leaves fell and withered until from the front yard you could almost make out the bright orange property line markers at the top of each of the three hills our home lay nestled beneath. The coyote cries in the night spurred me awake, left me restless. Patch did not return.

Sassy was the next to go. Again, without fanfare—just *gone*.

She and Sam had met up regularly with the preacher's dogs near the bottom of the hill that divided us. Theirs wasn't what I would call playful behavior. The pack would just stand at odds and look at one another, breathing. Anytime one of us noticed this through the bay window in the kitchen, we'd step outside and call the dogs back home. Since we never found her body, these tense stand-offs made it difficult to discern whether

Sassy's killer was feral or domesticated. Almost immediately, my dad returned home with a zip-line chain for Sam, the last dog standing.

* * *

One afternoon, now in my final year of middle school, I stepped off of the school bus and inadvertently walked back into a past life. There, at the crook in the driveway that kept our house out of sight from passersby, stood a black-and-white stranger. I froze, thinking a stray or an unfamiliar neighbor's dog had somehow wandered onto the property—it wouldn't be the first time. But as he approached, I knew.

“Patch?!”

His stench reached me before he did. He reeked of imminent death. Something like rotting meat. Like dead rats in the walls of a basement.

It had been almost nine months since he first went missing, but Patch appeared far from starved or emaciated. Still, he was undoubtedly in bad shape. His fur was gathered in dense clumps at the bottom of his coat. Some of it appeared to have fallen or been pulled out. His naturally white coat was blemished with bits of unsettling yellows and dingy greens. The whites of his eyes were wholly blood red.

Mom and Dad were more stunned than I was to see Patch. Mom wouldn't even go near him. *That dog is sick* is all she'd say, where I felt like I was living out one of my favorite childhood movies, *Homeward Bound*, in which three heroic lost pets traverse over mountains and streams and battle bears and mountain lions all to reconvene with their accidentally estranged family. Except, unlike the close of the film, there was no way I was going to rapturously embrace *that* putrid canine. I could hardly look at him.

For a few days, we let Patch sleep on a shop blanket in the garage, expecting that after a short time he would probably just pass away. But weeks went by and his health improved. His eyes came back. His head no longer drooped from his neck like an overbearing weight. He began to walk, even run, rather than drag himself around the yard. Eventually, we let him out of the garage full time and released Sam from his chain to see how they'd get along.

In short, they didn't.

Despite the changes to his outward appearance, somewhere inside Patch he was still his old self. He quickly grew jealous and aggressive toward Sam, would bear his teeth and lunge at either of their food dishes. Mom wasn't about to stand for it.

"Wayne, we need to get rid of this dog," she said, leering at Patch through the sliding door in the kitchen. "How did you do it last time?"

Dad was at the stove, working on a batch of spaghetti for dinner. He didn't need to look up to know which dog she was referring to.

"I just drove him out into the woods and dropped him off."

There was a pause. A beat to let the implications sink in, then:

"Well, I guess you ought to drive him out a little farther this time, huh?"

"Guess so," Dad sighed.

I overheard this conversation from the couch in the living room, but I don't remember reacting to it. I was shocked, of course, to learn that Patch's first disappearance had been no accident, that my parents had stuck wholeheartedly to a lie for the last nine months. It no doubt registered with me that this was an incredibly cruel way to dispose of a pet, but I didn't confront my parents about it or throw some kind of tantrum about the

fact that this cruelty was going to become a repeated behavior. The truth was, I wasn't happy at Patch's return either. I'd felt obligated to him, but not bonded. He was an attention hog, whether we had two dogs or five, so clingy and desperate we'd stumble and trip over him just trying to make it out to the car. He was the reason each member of the family had had, at least once, to change an article of clothing scarred by muddy paws. I petted him now out of pity, not love.

By the weekend, he was gone and no one said a word.

* * *

Within a year, Sam, the Labrador, limped out of the forest with a mangled, infected foot that required the full amputation of his leg. Then, six or seven months later, he vanished completely. My family placed a permanent hiatus on keeping outdoor pets.

But a family needs a dog.

The first to live indoors was Schroeder, a stout black Chihuahua/terrier mix born in my Grandma's trailer park. I raised him as my own and we were inseparable. By this time I was a sophomore in high school and my sister, a senior, was too busy with her job and her car and her boyfriend to give Schroeder much attention. In many ways, Schroeder was the closest thing to a perfect dog I'd ever had. Relatively small, he was easy and open to being picked up and cuddled, yet beefy and resilient enough to wrestle with me on the carpet. Best of all, he lived inside with the rest of us. There was no ignoring or forgetting about him. He was right there in your face with his chewed-up rope. There, every evening to nestle up against you on the floor in front of the TV. That is, until Mom bought herself a toy poodle and decided that two dogs was too many to live in one house; that she was sick of vacuuming up all of Schroeder's fine black fur. Claimed an allergy.

She began locking him out for hours at a time after she let him out do his business in the yard, began leaving him out on the front porch overnight, pressed up against the door on the welcome mat.

Some nights, Schroeder's lonesome barking took on a tinge of terror. A maniacal quality, as if his yelps were being ripped out by force. Those nights, I'd run outside in my boxers and t-shirt only to discover Schroeder in a teeth-bearing standoff with a roving opossum, its beady eyes florescent under the glare of my flashlight. I'd yell at Schroeder to go inside, but he wouldn't budge and when I tried to pick him up, he was dead weight, petrified solid, each muscle in his body stretched to full tension. The opossum might have been as close as three feet or as far off as a few yards, depending on the evening, but either distance was equally upsetting to me and especially to poor Schroeder. *Go on*, I'd yell, my voice cracking, the rabid, overgrown rat possibly seconds away from lashing out at my best friend. *Get the hell out of here!* I picked up anything I could find on the ground nearby—mostly sticks and rocks from the bay window garden—and chucked them as hard as I could at the head and torso of the vicious beast, but it remained unmoved. Its hiss only grew more menacing. To finally break up the fight, I almost always had to shake loose a few decorative boulders that lined a small patch of hostas and ferns near the front door, carry one as close as I could reasonably stand to the opossum, then launch it with the full force of my strength, intent to strike, if not just scare the thing away. Often it took several harrowing blows before the foul scavenger would saunter, unimpressed, off into the night.

As should be expected, given any opportunity Schroeder would try shove his way back indoors, his rightful home. When I didn't try to hide his entrance by sneaking him

off into my bedroom, these intrusions usually required a lengthy chase around the house, with stops to bend over to pull him out from under the bed or push him up the stairs, where he, again, would take off running. In these moments, generally everyone in the house would be yelling at the dog or at each other. Doors would fan open and closed, entrances and exits would be blocked. Teamwork was key.

Like Patch, Schroeder soon became defensive and for relatively the same reasons: cold nights spent lying on the porch instead of the warmth of his bed in the kitchen. The loss of the family's, and particularly *my* full attention to a newer, cuter, smaller dog who didn't shed. At the end of each chase around the house, Schroeder began to spit and gnash at his would-be captor (usually me). He began to leave bite marks on my skin.

When Schroeder, too, went missing, there was no telling what could've been the cause. He was scrappy and tough, but still fairly small, no more than twenty pounds. Not a dog suited for the untamed woodlands of Mark Twain National Forest, nor one that could fend off two dogs both more than twice his size, nor a human mother with a stubborn grudge.

Schroeder's disappearance is the one that still haunts me. The one that doesn't add up. He wasn't the type to wander into the woods like the larger dogs that came before him. Schroeder was a homebody. A yard dog. One who felt most safe near his people. Perhaps that was his undoing. I've never been brave enough to ask.

* * *

Baxter, though, was murdered without question. Being a toy poodle—not only the smallest dog we'd ever owned, but also the first our family had purchased rather than inherit—he was not allowed to be outdoors for more than a few minutes and never, ever

out of sight. But rules like this are bent and broken again and again until you can hardly remember their intent or impetus. One afternoon, my mother stepped away for a moment after letting Baxter out just as the German Shepherd, Emmitt, happened to be wandering through the upper field. Likely, Baxter saw this unfamiliar movement and ran curiously into his own demise. The Shepherd-assailant followed Baxter up the driveway to watch him collapse in our front yard. He retreated only when he heard my mother's scream.

At the vet, they pumped Baxter's little lungs full of air and ran an I.V. into one of his legs, but the life soon drained out of him. Deep puncture wounds to the abdomen. Internal bleeding. He'd been shaken and tossed like a slab of meat chucked into a cage of lions. Back home, we placed Baxter in a tiny shoebox on the kitchen floor and sat at the table and cried and cried until Dad took him outside and dug a hole by the empty oil drum we burned our trash in.

It was like losing a member of the family. A loss my mother still feels in her bones.

Baxter was the first and only dog whose loss resulted in tears from any of us, yet I feel no need to question our behavior. Besides Casey, who was fairly old and was never really *ours*, the disappearance of each of the others was a slow fade, not a shock. Each departure left us with hope, however small, that one day the lost might return, just as Patch did that fateful afternoon. By the time we realized that these dogs were gone, the news had already worn thin. We'd moved on. But Baxter, even if he hadn't been incredibly tender and clever and sweet, even if he hadn't been rendered with the enhanced prestige of being my mother's dog, his miniscule size, his utter fragility, the

protectiveness he required that we failed, just momentarily, to uphold, and his sudden, brutal death would have broken the heart of anyone who was there to witness it.

Maybe that's the key: to bear witness. To gaze into the face of the thing, not allowing oneself to look away or think oneself elsewhere amid the unjust and the cruel, be it toward humankind or animal. Indifference is much too easy on us all.

* * *

A small black dog rests between my reclined calves—a cousin or possibly a niece of Schroeder, born in the same trailer park to the same family, though the exact relation I can't say. She—Lola—is almost Schroeder's clone, jet black with pointed ears and the same patch of white on her chest and two of her paws. Like the now nine-year-old pekingnese-poodle that my mother bought to fill the absence of Baxter, Lola, who just recently turned five, will likely outlive all of my childhood pets. Though I no longer live beyond the protective confines of concrete and steel structures, Lola is allowed outside only in fenced yards or on a leash. Likewise, the rest of my family has relocated to suburban communities where the largest threats to their pets are ticks and mosquitoes. We all know too well the cruelty of wooded jaws. Of neighbors who stop answering their phone when their pet comes home with blood between his teeth. Today, we all live by the same mantra:

Nothing always in sight can ever disappear.

Part 4: Things I Assume Most People Aren't Scared Of

The Essayist is Not Afraid of Bubbles

The essay should begin with a proclamation of fear. Something direct, like: “I think I’ve always been afraid of bubbles.” Or, if not a proclamation, a sense of building toward one. Concrete details. A sense that a pressure from within and without has become unbearable, has brought the essayist to the point of his collapse. That whatever this thing, this panic-inducing, “irrational” compulsion *is* has, by the time of writing, crippled the essayist into the prostrate position—forced his mind and body to shape the fear into a digestible framework. *But, how to make them believe?* he will think as the answer becomes immediately clear: *They must fear my fear. I will make them.*

* * *

Trends in the form would dictate the use of hyperbole. That the essayist should engorge his truth to the point of untruth—of being unbelievable, obsessive. His fear must become his world-builder, must be ubiquitous and inescapable. In the life-narrative implied in the blank space between his words, his reader should be able to imagine the essayist’s fear as something infinite. His existence, a constant threat of lightning strike. Yet, the latter point may be where the power of the hyperbolic begins to fade. For what is more ubiquitous and inescapable than bubbles? Or, moreover, all projectile liquids—any fluid released in a squirt, spray, or mist? Should one have a psycho-social aversion to these things, short of agoraphobia what fear is more difficult to build a life around? To paint convincingly for an ever-skeptical audience?

* * *

They ask his why and he buckles, becomes apologetic. Maybe *fear* is not the word. Such a loaded term. So arrogant of him to claim this mild discomfort as something potentially phobic, even if he would become physically stiff, would grit his teeth should a waiter approach his unbussed table, trigger finger poised on a bottle of murky blue. Even if he once found himself short of breath when a splash of water slung in celebration met his neck while standing in a crowd at a concert. Even if, when his friend surprise-spritzed him with a dash of perfume, his reflex was to kick the friend so hard in the ass they didn't speak for the rest of the evening.

* * *

If they humor him, they ask for a genesis story. A starting point. The timeline of this relatively peculiar quirk. A reason to believe. But he can give no answer that would satisfy them. He could tell them about the woman at his daycare that would Lysol the play area like a human-shaped fog machine set on disinfecting every rowdy kid into submission. About how, as a kid, he would run from his mother in a fit anytime the dispensing of bug spray or sunscreen were even mentioned in passing. Or how he would lie about washing his hands to avoid the splat of liquid soap, so slimy and grotesque it was liable to make him gag. But these are just more symptoms, not a source.

* * *

But maybe fear isn't an unseen entity that one builds his life around. Maybe it's the things that we don't think about constantly—the actions we take without consideration or thinking—that tell us more about ourselves than our day-to-day preoccupations. That say more about us than a story or speculation ever could.

* * *

Still, the question remains and the essayist must perform. Must “essay himself to be,” as Grandfather Emerson would put it. And there is a story, even if it may not be *the* story. Even if one telling detail or another may have frayed at its edges over time: The essayist, a curious child, opening the door to the shed in the backyard of his family’s little house on South Avondale. A bottle of window cleaner unsteady on a high shelf. The smell of chemical blue as it came falling, the clean pouring into his eyes. Or, perhaps something else. Another incident. A different day. Some stories can’t find their own beginning. Some parts of ourselves can never be explained. The shed was the color of brick. Only that much is certain.

On Darkness

“Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.”

— *Mary Oliver*

I was enamored with the idea of getting lost in the woods at night without a flashlight until, one night, it happened. *No flashlight means there’s another world*, a song had told me and I gripped the notion tightly. I would park on remote roads, shut my headlights off, roll the windows down and listen to the wind, the creaking trees, the absence of all else. *Knowing the world is unsung and being able to hush*. These moments, I thought, were true peace, disregarding, of course, my unqualified safety, sitting comfortably within the cozy shell of my vehicle. *Turning off the light is being welcomed home*.

* * *

According to the Book of Genesis, the first three things to exist on Earth were darkness, water, and the Spirit of God. In this state, Earth is described as “formless and empty,” cloaked in perpetual black. Here, the Spirit hovers, unseen above the depths. Here, darkness is an opaque veil, the thin partition between existence and nothingness. Here, the Earth, shapeless, waits.

* * *

Darkness obliterates. It heightens awareness. It amplifies the inner voice by obscuring everything else. It allows for the unnerving of the Self, in its way, by

rendering the distinct amorphous. “Only the formless is permanent,” says Ashtavakra, the ancient Hindu sage. In his holy book, the *Ashtavakra Gita*, he urges his disciple, Janaka, to live within and without the dark—to shed the artifice of perception, becoming fully conscious by recognizing that all is equally nothing. To Ashtavakra, one’s sense of sight is merely an impediment. A being that is truly *free* “never closes his eyes or opens them.”

* * *

Like many, if not most children, I grew up terrified of the dark, haunted by vivid, oppressive nightmares. At night, my dreams traversed into the plane of the real, my hallucinations so bona fide that even a nightlight did nothing to stop them. Within the light the visions only appeared that much more present and *alive*.

* * *

Before we got lost, my friend David and I liked to take late afternoon hikes, daring the sun to set against us—its fading light our motivation to hurry back to the trailhead. Secretly, though, I always hoped that we wouldn’t be able to outrun the rising dark.

* * *

Only ten percent of all blind people have no sense of vision, yet so many of us (myself included) equate the term with the concept of a life led in pure pitch black. On the contrary, most blind people can perceive some amount of light and for some, like writer Jorge Luis Borges, this “light” is everlasting, even after they close their eyes. For those like Borges, whose vision deteriorated over time, light is often a curse, an invader that cannot be escaped. Such individuals are kept awake by a world of “greenish or

bluish mist, vaguely luminous.” They long for a darkness that will not come. They mourn its loss.

* * *

A film, most agree, is best viewed in total darkness. For the devoted cinephile, the lights cannot dim fast enough—even an exit sign is too bright to allow for an unadulterated immersion into the projected universe, a full lift of the ethereal curtain. In the theater, we *need* darkness because darkness erases the periphery. It shuts distractions, heightens and defines focus. In the dark, our eyes naturally latch to any light source, no matter how small or distant. But the darkness of a theater is an anomaly. There, as in sleep, we ignore the dark. We *choose* it; are made more comfortable by its presence. We are not afraid of what we cannot see.

* * *

The nightmares of children are at their most realistic just as the sense of imagination begins to develop, between the ages of two or three. In the daytime, from this point on, one’s creative possibilities are without end. A new world can be seized from thin air. At night, though, the same imagination thrives, producing terror instead of joy. Shadow becomes beast, the dark a cloak for the evil and violent. Windows, doors, and even mirrors turn into open gates for harm to pass through. As a child, I could bury my head in blankets and tightly shut my eyes, but I would still hear the cackling, the growling. I would still feel the hot breath bearing down upon me.

* * *

“All sorrow comes from fear,” says Ashtavakra, “From nothing else. When you know this, you become free of it.”

* * *

Borges, like Milton before him, thought of his blindness as a gift. As an avid reader, writer, scholar, and even librarian, one could easily see what a tragedy his loss of sight could have been, but Borges was resolute, saying, “Since I have lost the world of appearances, I must create something else.”

* * *

For me, inspiration comes easiest in the middle of the night, so that’s when I usually sit down and try not to stare at the blank page before me. When I do this, I like to sit in a dark room. It’s an inconvenient, perhaps even off-putting idea, I know, but it’s a practice that I try to adhere to because it seems like the empty page only begins to fill when I turn the lights out. When I dim my computer screen. When I absorb the quiet, the electric, still, nothing. I do this because, here, in the dark, worlds merge, the astral plane between memory and ideation and impetus is rendered cloudless, if only temporarily.

* * *

Nearly all of the available literature for parents of children who fear the dark advise four basic rules: Never play into the fear. Turn off the television long before bedtime. Don’t get frustrated. And *never* let the child sleep in your bed. But, my parents were very young when they raised me and they weren’t the type of people who would look to a book for help with their kids. So, I can’t blame them for threatening me with the Boogeyman, for keeping the television on from dinner until bedtime every night, for not changing the channel when I said a program was scaring me, for sometimes getting upset when I appeared at their bedside. I can’t blame them for, more often than not,

letting me climb in with them. They didn't know that they were the authors of their own misfortunes. And mine.

* * *

In Exodus, God descends upon Mount Sinai in a dense, black cloud of smoke and lightning, trumpets blaring and fire erupting from the mountain. As the Lord intends, the Israelites are terrified by this spectacle—struck with the fear of God. When the moment arrived for the Almighty to declare His commandments to the nation of Israel, “the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.”

* * *

One evening, a few years after I had retired my nightlight, my fear of the dark was reignited when I wandered into the living room while my parents watched a special on TV about demon possession. The tone of the program wasn't mocking or distanced, this was *news*, or at least that's how it seemed to me. A middle-aged man had smashed a glass case containing a supposedly possessed Raggedy Ann doll and was found dead the following morning. A boy awoke with the name of his former hometown inexplicably scratched into his skin. A girl, speaking with an unnatural voice in a language her parents couldn't understand, had to be strapped to her bed to keep from convulsing. Needless to say, from that night forward demon possession became my greatest fear.

* * *

The night we got lost, David and I decided to double our bet against the setting sun. Not only did we take an unfamiliar trail, we trekked several miles farther into the state park than we'd ever gone before, caught up in conversation and waiting for

something significant to tell us, “It’s time to turn around.” When we finally emerged at a trailhead at the opposite end of the park from where we’d begun, the landscape was already tinged the murky blue of twilight: a warning announced to eyes blinded with excitement.

* * *

Ironically, John Newton, the writer who penned, “Amazing Grace,” went blind in the last years of his life. The lyrics to his most celebrated hymn were inspired by Newton’s own story of conversion—one of the most infamous and drastic spiritual transformations in modern Christian lore. Before his conversion, if one had said to any of Newton’s peers that the man they knew as a foul-mouthed, slave-trading, military deserter would one day pen what many consider to be the greatest Christian hymn ever composed, they’d likely be laughed out of the tavern. Let alone that Newton would eventually don priestly vestments in the Anglican Church and become a staunch and quite vocal abolitionist. Inconceivable. Yet, Newton’s moment of salvation was grounded primarily in fear. Beneath dark, thunderous clouds, while weathering a horrific storm at sea, Newton begged for mercy from the Lord and committed his life to Him, if only he were allowed to survive.

* * *

My fear of becoming possessed didn’t cease even after, at age eleven, I found salvation at a small Southern Baptist church. If anything, it was legitimized. The dark figure in the hallway outside my bedroom door still manifested itself, only now I attempted to keep it at bay with prayer instead of just hiding my head in a quilt. Every

night, I made a new appeal to the Lord, but the unholy shadow still appeared to float into my room, to linger over my bed, a *darkness that could be felt*.

* * *

At the new trailhead, David and I stood for a while beneath a wooden pavilion, studying a map of the park stapled to a corkboard behind glass. According to the map, we had two choices: the safe—to go back the way we came, making our way in a wide half-circle around the edge of the park; or the risky—to strike a new path on a twisting trail that seemed to cut across the middle. We hardly had to speak a word to come to an agreement that risk is almost always preferable to safety.

* * *

I lost my fear of possession and, finally, of the dark, when around age twelve or thirteen, I started to stay up late at night to talk to strangers about sex—when, so to speak, a new demon gained control of my body and my life. These chats became an almost nightly ritual with certain rites to be followed precisely: the blinded creep through the hall and into the kitchen; the counting of stairs, never stepping on the creaking fifth or seventh; the strained listen for snoring at the door to the next floor, which I closed slowly, turning the knob to avoid the sound of the catching latch; the muffling of the dial-up sound by covering the computer tower with a quilt that was usually draped across the back of the couch; the necessary increase to my age on my online profile; the pursuit, which, unfortunately, never took very long. These nights were still, but for the clicking of keys. The dark, absolute, but for the glow of the screen.

* * *

It's strange to think that John Newton never heard the version of "Amazing Grace" we know so well today. Newton was a lyricist, not a composer, so his hymn was actually written as a chant—a call and response—not a song. Before he died, there were more than twenty different melodies attached to his words, but the hymn itself was still fairly obscure. It wasn't until sixty years after Newton first penned the words, nearly twenty years after his death, that they were finally joined to the tune that few could ever forget—the tune sung by Cherokees on the Trail of Tears, by soldiers fighting in the Civil War, by slaves toiling in the fields—an uplifting song for the darkest moments in this country's history.

* * *

Even at my most committed, I only ever prayed in the dark. Talking to God never felt appropriate in the world of the physical, the world of sight. I knew that prayer was a necessity; I just had to find the means. So, I employed the dark to intoxicate myself into speech. In the deep black of my basement bedroom, I spoke into the open, borderless space where, for a time, it seemed as though He could hear me.

* * *

When David and I glanced over it, the trailhead map had seemed straightforward—there appeared to be only a single, steady path back to the car. But, there were forks. There were dead ends. There were creeks to cross and tall hills to traverse. From the edge of a cliff overlooking a small stream, David and I watched the sun fall below the tree line and paused for a moment to admire the view: the cascades of color piercing the cracks of space between the leaves. Then, we exchanged an eager, apprehensive glance and set into an all-out run.

* * *

After the Ark of the Covenant was placed in Solomon's temple, the presence of God is said to have filled the grand hall in the form of a impenetrable black fog—a murk so dense and potent that the priests within the temple could not continue to minister, lest they suffocate on the Holy Spirit. Witnessing this, Solomon recalled God's descent onto Sinai, and prayed, shortsightedly, "O Lord, you have said that you would live in a cloud of thick darkness. Now I have built a temple for you, a place where you can live forever."

* * *

With my high school girlfriend, Ashley, the darkness of a holy building was a refuge, a means to our stolen moments. In our church's rarely used locker room, we sat astride a long bench and shut our eyes though it made no difference. In that kind of dark, the eyes ache regardless. Since her family commuted into town only twice a week, this was our only time alone: sightless, pushing our faces into each other.

* * *

Soon, in the state park, all was black. Our pace slowed. We tripped over small rocks and roots that jutted out of the ground unseen by our blinded eyes. David and I laughed at ourselves—at the whole situation, really—until it began to seem as though it may never end. Until the temperature began to drop. Until our legs began to feel weak and our stomachs began to growl. Until there were more and more forks to decide between, each looking equally as discouraging and fruitless as the last.

* * *

Obviously, even priests are sinners, but even the most devout teenage boy simply isn't equipped to receive confession. Still, Tim and I tried. Best friends, we attempted to

hold one another accountable, as our youth pastor had trained us. At night, when we stayed over at each other's houses, we'd lay in the dark and asked each other any and every question we'd never have the guts to pose in plain sight. Primarily, though, we talked about lust. Temptation. Our struggles with pornography. The unspeakable *m-word*, which, despite the dark, we addressed only with ellipses. *Are you still...? Have you been...?*

* * *

In the locker room, Ashley and I kissed and endeavored to listen, but the door was locked and no one was trying to open it. Though the church was filled with people on Wednesday nights, it was a large, multi-storied building. No one would discover us. Our friends hunted throughout the building without success; bit us with their eyes when we resurfaced, but said nothing. They wanted only to protect us, but we hid from them where even we could not see.

* * *

That night in the woods, David and I used the dim light from our cell phones (I'd almost opted to leave mine in the car) to decipher which path in a given fork seemed more well tread—the better chance for escape. Though the hike was becoming a bit of a struggle, we weren't yet desperate or upset or disturbed. Just aggravated. Tired. Hungry. Bored. Despite all of this, we still stopped a few times to gaze into the night, to shutter our cell phones and try, to no avail, to see the hands in front of our faces. *Crawling in the dark, saying "no flashlight" is saying "yes, everything else."*

* * *

Though Tim and I spoke freely and often encouraged one another all of those nights in basements and bedrooms, it seemed that neither of us was gaining much traction in the battle for our souls against our natural hormonal inclinations. Instead, we just felt more agony, more shame and, in turn, began to keep secrets from each other. I, at least, began to avoid those conversations all together. For years, we'd shared a nearly unadulterated trust, but Tim never dated in high school and what went on between my steady girlfriend and me was, to me, none of his business, if for nothing else than for *her* sake.

* * *

Ashtavakra says:

The mind desires this,

And grieves for that.

It embraces one thing,

And spurns another.

Now it feels anger,

Now happiness.

In this way you are bound.

* * *

In the woods, there wasn't time for awareness. Not the kind I had longed for, anyway. There wasn't a sensation of oneness with the black. I didn't lose myself in it, I feared for myself. I yelped when a few birds took flight from a tree I was passing under.

I worried, as I had when I was a child, about what might be lurking around me beneath the veil of night.

* * *

Teenagers are prone to melodrama; depressed Christian teenagers augment this understatement to biblical proportions. They spend their evenings looking for the darkest poetic lines available in the Old Testament instead of doing their homework. They write verses from the Book of Job in ballpoint pen on the walls around their bed. They listen to Christian bands with song titles like “All My Friends Are On Prozac” and “Second Best” and “Sperm Ridden Burden.” They go to sleep so guilt-stricken and bereaved that they fear they may not be allowed to wake.

* * *

Without his sight, Jorge Luis Borges learned new languages, continued to work as a professor, became the director of the national library of Brazil and wrote many, many great works of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Like Milton and even James Joyce, late in his life, Borges composed his sentences one-by-one along the infinite canvas of his own mind. He built masterpieces in the dark, using his voice alone to transport them onto the page and into the visible world. “A writer,” he said, “must believe that whatever happens to him is an instrument; everything has been given for an end... Everything that happens, including humiliations, embarrassments, misfortunes, all has been given like clay, like material for one’s art. Those things are given to us to transform, so that we may make from the miserable circumstances of our lives things that are eternal, or aspire to be so. If a blind man thinks this way, he is saved. Blindness is a gift.”

* * *

Just after I graduated high school, I renounced my faith in Christ. I even spoke the words into the air to make it official, which in some denominations is an unforgivable

sin. Despite this a dark, heavy weight was lifted from my chest. A dragging anchor disconnected. For the first time that I could remember I felt *nothing*. No guilt. No pain. No sorrow. The eye of God had gone blind and I was free.

* * *

Ashtavakra says:

Clinging to nothing,

You become still.

* * *

When David and I finally emerged out of the forest, when, at last, the car was in sight, looking no more abandoned than it had when we left it hours before, I was overjoyed to shelter myself back into the cab, into a realm of manufactured comfort. Inside, I flipped a switch and my headlights flooded the vacant gravel lot with an unnatural florescence, setting a stark tinge of darkness over most of the surrounding area. Before I pulled away, I looked back once more into the deep shadow beyond the trees with a peculiar sense of gratitude—thankful to have traversed through and emerged unscathed from that black, amorphous cloud.

Part 5: The Other People in My Family

I Expected More From You

After a full two years as a chubby, feeble-minded milksop and object of entertainment for a sister who liked to play “automatic-Jack-in-the-box” using my passy as a pull-tab, the time for revenge was nigh. Not only was I now mobile—tremendously swift on all fours and a wiggle-walker of notable merit—but I had developed early the understanding that I could know and use to my advantage something that my sister did not. In this case, I inferred namely that when Alicia watched TV in the living room she was aware of little else around her and that since the television was located opposite the entrance from the kitchen into the living room, if one were light-footed and made sure not to walk into the room during a commercial break, he’d be rendered an almost ghost-like presence to an older sister so worthy of a just come-uppance that it hurt.

On a certain Saturday morning, the hammer of justice came down.

Mom was in the kitchen, probably working without success with Comet and a scrub-brush at a bit of grit on the stove that had been picking at her subconscious for weeks, when my soft-padded feet ventured across the linoleum floor and stopped at the edge of the living room carpet. Mom turned to face me as I peered silent and contemplative at the back of my sister’s head a few yards off, but she didn’t say a word. Somehow, Mom seemed acutely attuned to the significance of the events about to unfold before her and she was not about to stymie herself into the middle of the show.

Together, the three of us formed a procession of unaware observers: my pig-tailed sister, body splayed across the living room carpet in perfect line with the television,

head in her hands, fully engrossed in the undoubtedly harrowing plotline of a Strawberry Shortcake TV special designed to sell smelly dolls to smelly children; me, a few paces behind her, scrutinizing her every subtle movement—her toes wiggling their silent delight at the antics of the dessert-themed humanoids onscreen—biding my time, waiting for the perfect moment to unsheathe the pent-up thunder I’d held so long within my tiny fists; and my mother, the human watchtower: a silent, indomitable eye over the whole damn thing.

At the first onscreen sight of the Peculiar Purple Pie Man—which assured some semblance of peril would soon fall upon Shortcake and her unpalatable pals, in turn causing an even greater sense of engagement from my otherwise oblivious sister—I made my move. Within seconds, my full Pampered weight was sat across her back and before she had time to say, “What’re you doin’, bubbysaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” I had a pigtail in each of my fists and was pulling backward with every bit of holy might I had within me, digging my unshod heels into the brown Berber carpet.

Though I could not yet speak, I have to think that a brutal subtext was communicated amid the strength-gathering grunts that accompanied that hair-based half-nelson: *THIS is what you get when you mess around with other people’s things. Keep your motherfuckin’ hands off of my motherfuckin’ binky.*

Helpless to overcome my ruthless submission hold, Alicia cried out for relief from our on-looking mother, but her cries were in vain. Mom was doubled-over in the kitchen, gasping for air, tears welling up in her eyes. She could hardly hear Alicia’s screams over the sound of her own cackling, having just witnessed the funniest thing she’d ever seen.

Despite this formative moment, the power struggle between my older sister and I rarely came to blows. Sure, there was the time that she came up short of kicking me in the crotch only to receive a direct hit in kind that, despite her complete lack of male anatomy, she sure acted as though it hurt just the same, but altercations like these were the exception, not the rule. In truth, I was mostly unaware that a real struggle between us even existed. I suppose you could call it elective naïveté. Of course, I was and remain cognizant that we are definitively different people—something I tried in vain for years to “correct”—but it wasn’t until recently that I realized the weighty chip that my sister bears upon her shoulder; that I began to understand how she carries around with her a widely variant narrative of our shared childhood: the notion of being viewed as “less than” her kid brother.

* * *

There’s something that stings about the phrase, “I didn’t know you had a sister.” One feels like they’ve done something of an injustice to this as-yet-unmentioned loved one. Like they don’t have anything nice or interesting or even anecdotally topical to say about a person that they shared a large portion of years with in the same household. Like they’ve somehow tried to pretend that their sibling didn’t exist.

Usually, when asked about my sister, I’ll just say something like, “We grew up in the same house with the same parents and are only a year and a half apart, but she has a Southern accent and somehow I don’t, if that tells you anything about how different we are.” This is an undoubtedly dubious way to deflect unwelcome conversation, but it’s also a statement of fact. Though Alicia’s intonation of speech isn’t exactly your run-of-

the-mill bayou drawl, there's a distinctly south-of-the-Mason-Dixon tinge to the way she says things like "brackfist" and "tollit" and the inexplicable "bap-pack". Yet, at least as far as anyone has ever told me, there is nothing distinctive to speak of about the sound of *my* voice. If anything, I "sound kind of Midwestern"—whatever that means—or, even less precisely, I "sound, I don't know, *American*." As my mom would put it, "Alicia's from Southeast Missouri. I don't know *where* you came from."

I can remember being four or five, Alicia six or seven, and in frustration asking her, "Why do you talk like that? Why don't you sound like the people on TV?" and finding myself further flabbergasted at the "Whuttayameen?" she used as her reply.

"Yuuuuu sowwwnd lack theeussss," I said, jutting my lower lip out and crossing my eyes, trying my best to look as dim-witted as she sounded to my ear.

"No, I doun't! Doun't make funna may! Mahm!"

It wasn't always like this. Yet, the more I think about it, it was. The more memories I attempt to reconstruct, the more I begin to wonder if the divide that still stands unmentioned between my sister and I may have been drawn before the moment I began to speak my first words, a division enacted and anchored without intent or even basic awareness amidst the dangerous ignorance of children—born of fits and of fists, of a kind of incidental dominance that neither one of us has ever been brave enough to acknowledge to the other even all of these years later.

* * *

As a kid, I had a tendency to overstep my bounds. Let's be kind and simply say that I "lacked discernment" as to the social standing I was granted given my diminutive size and mental capacity. It bears acknowledging that the line between smart and smart-

ass is often very thin. So, when Alicia first began to come home from preschool with worksheets and activities to complete, my mom and dad learned fast that to maintain peace they'd have to keep me at a distance. But, I simply could not be contained when one evening Alicia came home with a lesson on counting money.

I loved to count money. Money made Hot Wheels.

The deal went that anytime I could collect 100 pennies, I could get a new Hot Wheels car. This was a binding contract brokered by my mother with the expectation that it would either motivate me to learn how to count or at very least save her a few bucks (and tantrums) should we happen to roll by the toy aisle at the local supermarket. Secretly, though, I think that Mom could already tell that if I really wanted something I'd do whatever it took to get it—or, regardless, that I could be easily bought. But I understood quickly that if 100 pennies equaled one dollar and one dollar equaled one Hot Wheel, I needed not only to start collecting every bit of change I could get my hands on, I had to figure out which numbers followed which and what coins represented what amounts *pronto*. I was skidding a shiny, silver-sparkled Lambo across the carpet within a couple of weeks.

So, watching my older sister struggle to distinguish between a nickel and a quarter was *killing me*. Didn't she know that four big ones made one flame-decaled Corvette? That ten tiny ones made a souped-up Sharkruiser? That two stacks of ten thick ones with the ponytail guy could get you a Big Foot or a Gravedigger?

"That's a quarter!" I shouted from the nearby couch, covering my mouth to hold in any further exclamations on the subject. My mother hushed me, but patted my leg in a way that said, *Good job, baby, but let her get it.*

Alicia turned her back toward me, blocking my sight from her work. This only further provoked me. By now, I'd tucked my fingers beneath my thighs to cease their anxious clawing at my OshKosh pant legs, but the rest of my body was more difficult to pull under restraint. My neck craned and weaved, my heart in near palpitations, as I attempted every available means short of putting my chin on my sister's shoulder to catching a glimpse at a worksheet that I couldn't even read.

"That—that's two nickels! That's the same as a dime!" I screamed, wild with excitement when I finally caught a peek. Alicia was not pleased. She slammed her oversized pencil onto the coffee table and spun toward me with a face that told me she was not afraid to hide the bulb of my nightlight or to flush my comfort blanket down the commode.

"This is *my* homework!" she shouted. "Get your own!"

"But, I don't go to school," I said, trying to play pitiful, praying that she might let me stick around and watch her work a little longer—exercising the old "baby brudder" card. No such luck.

"Just go away then!" she nearly spat, her nostrils set to maximum flare.

I appealed to my mother with a forlorn look, but was soon motioned toward the hallway and back to my bedroom until Alicia could finish up her work. Once inside, I tore the spherical topper off of my bank—an oversized plastic baseball bat—and spilled its contents onto the floor, rubbing my hands across the mounds of tarnished copper and zinc for those rare glints of precious silver, which soon I began to count.

To clarify, I didn't just think that I was more intelligent than my older sister; I assumed that my intellectual prowess exceeded many, if not most adults and I made these so-called figureheads painfully aware of that fact in no uncertain terms. "Talkative." "Outspoken." "Opinionated." "General disregard for authority." These were the repeatedly appearing terms and phrases of at least the first five years of report cards I received in elementary school. Stuff like, "Matthew is very bright, but he needs to learn to distinguish what is and is not an appropriate way to address his teachers and superiors" and "Though it is apparent that Matthew is very clever, his intellect would be better spent on his work in class instead of on drawing the attention of his peers or making abusive and/or opinionated comments toward his instructors."

On several occasions in these first years, my mother was be called in for conferences with teachers and principals alike, forced to withstand a tri-monthly screed concerning the "necessary medication" and/or behavioral therapy that my family could neither afford nor had any interest in. At these conferences, my mom would usually say things like, "You're just not challenging him. He's only acting out because he's bored," and at some point, when worked up enough at the critical barrage being unleashed upon her by a young teacher at her wit's end, Mom might accuse the instructor of simply looking for an anesthetic answer to a reasonably common issue. I'm certain that went over really well.

My sister, on the other hand, was hardly on the radar at school—so well-behaved and quiet as to blend into the amateur artwork plastered along the wall of her classroom. I don't say this merely to draw further distinction between the two of us; I point it out because with such a stark contrast of character I'm amazed that my sister liked to be

around me at all. The fact that she would invite me into her room time and again to shake up her typical dollhouse routine with a Cobra invasion that resulted in the sacrificial suicides of a legion of Quints dolls from the top of the thatched roof of Barbie's Mansion says a great deal about the brother/sister bond that I took and, in all honesty, continue to take for granted. Maybe that's the key to this familial discord that I've been missing: that difference heightens difference until some level of equilibrium is met—even if it isn't exactly steady or very "equal". Perhaps I was born strange or difficult, but maybe my sister somehow helped to sharpen the edge of my weird (possibly endearing?) tendencies by letting me do absolutely whatever I wanted, as long it meant that I would play nice with her. It's possible that those times role-playing jewel-encrusted unicorn adventures—*Tales of the Crystal*—or battling it out to get the best price on haute couture—*Mall Madness*—or feeding all of those goddamned Cabbage Patch Kids implicitly taught me how to find enjoyment in things I might at first assume would be asinine or tedious. Perhaps that's why distinctions as to what is and is not considered "masculine" or "feminine" have never really concerned me. Ken dolls and GI Joes both wear flesh-colored underpants. They're both as much action figures as they are dolls. One just has more muscles. And a face scar. And a gun.

It's easy to forget that your siblings are often your first friends. Easy to concoct an abstract story that silences rather than dissects uncomfortable memories. Easier to misplace memory instead of seeking forgiveness. Easier not to call.

Maybe that's the issue: my sister and I have both been too easy on ourselves. I've chosen to forget the past and live oblivious to Alicia's pain, to be emotionally and physically distant—highly out of character for anyone who gets to know me. She,

likewise, has too long towed a line of thinking that somehow imparts that she deserves less than her due. That, despite what reality may reveal, I am somehow more fortunate or favored than she.

We both are guilty of neglect; are both worthy of absolution. The difficulty is in the first word.

* * *

Before I decided to detest the genre outright around age 9, my sister and I loved to sing country-western songs together in the backseat of the car on trips with our parents. It would not be an exaggeration to say that we know every word to every song that was played on Clear 94 KKLR, the strongest broadcast of any station in the tri-county area by far. On the way to grandma's house, we'd sit cross-legged in the back cab of my dad's white Bronco and belt, *Here's your one chance, Fancy, don't let me downwwwwwn. Bow-dow bow-bah-dow!* or "Boot-Scootin' Boogie" or "Chattahoochie", wheedling the guitar solos and passing verses back and forth in impromptu duets.

I struggle to string together complete memories from the many years that I shared side-by-side with my sister—all of those muggy summers stuck inside the house on a rural road, miles from anything, while our parents were at work—but I can still remember my sister's favorite song. I can still see propped up against a wheel-well, her big brown eyes peering over her microphone-fist, shoulders jutting in sassy swagger to the beat as she sang, *My daddy said you wasn't worth a lick / when it comes to brains you got the short end of the stick.*

Sometimes when I sing people tell me they hear a touch of a Southern accent.

Working Man

My father loves to talk about lime.

Not *limes*. Lime. Or, more specifically, calcium hydroxide—that white, powdery stuff. My dad can talk about that stuff for hours. That and highways, the two primary tools of his trade: dragging HAZMAT and corrosives in huge tanks from state to state. When he and I talk on the phone and I can't think of anything else to say or I want to do more than just nervously rattle off everything that's happened in my life in the months that have passed since our last conversation—when I really, really just want him to say anything other than “huh”—I'll ask my dad where he's driven to lately. I almost always regret it.

I'm sure this is true for most truckers, but the places my dad drives to just really aren't that interesting. At least not anymore. When he first started working as a truck driver, Dad's job seemed somewhat exciting, adventurous even. His company had him hopping from Texas to California, then back to Indiana, on to Cleveland, Philadelphia, Boston, and D.C. In, around, and through every major city of the Rust Belt, the Bible Belt, the Heartland, Bayou, and Dixie—any-and-everywhere beyond the bounds of Southeast Missouri, the only place we'd ever called home.

Having visited less than five states by that point in my life, it was hard for me to think of all of Dad's traveling as *work*. I'd never been to many of those places—still haven't been to some—so I couldn't help but imagine Dad's life as a kind of road trip montage: a close shot of Dad, grinning in trucker hat and aviator sunglasses,

superimposed over a map of the US, a red line scribbling out his path from one place to the next. Dad, winking as countless iconic cities and monuments pass through his rearview mirror, chuckling something like, “See ya next time, Lady Liberty!” etc.

But, for whatever reason, my Dad never really had any stories to tell or sights to speak of. None that have stuck out or stayed with me, anyway. Only roads: *You take 57 to 64 to 71, then over to 70, once you get around Columbus, ride that ‘til Harrisburg, then you get on 76 for a few hours...* Sometimes, if my mom hears him doing this—say, if for a moment she’s handed the phone off to him so she can go to the bathroom—I’ll hear her call out, “Wayne! Stop talking in numbers! Nobody wants to hear that!” and he’ll just say, “I know... I know...” almost as if he’s coming out of a trance.

In Dad’s view, I’m sure, he’s just letting me in on his particular expertise: here is a man who can trace the very veins and arteries of this asphalt-tethered nation. Who knows her anatomy. But, outside of A&P 101, most people don’t care to talk about how the subclavian forks at the axillary and cephalic, which, in turn, flips a U at the median cubital. It doesn’t make for good conversation. For him, though, that never sinks in. For him, the map *is* the story. Or, at least, the work is.

* * *

As a kid, my dad called me “Dingleberry” and to this day will claim he didn’t know it was an epithet for a bit of dung dangling from a man’s butt hair. To him, it was just a goofy nickname. His way of saying, “Hey! I like you, ya little turd!”

I didn’t think anything of the nickname, either, until at age twelve I went to church camp and I saw one: “Did you see Tyler’s dingleberry when he ran out into the hallway!?” There was no question as to what my friend was referring to.

Though the boy that barrelled down the dorm hallway was stark naked, the most distinctive feature of his nakedness had not been his dangling prepubescent member. Rather, it was the unexpected brown bunny tail Tyler wore as he chased down the hall the two pranksters who'd just flung open his bathroom door and fired shampoo from full bottles as he sat, trapped, on the john.

Dingleberry? I thought, replaying in my head a hundred iterations of the once playful remark.

"Hey, what's for dinner, Dingleberry?"

"You gotta choke the bat up, Dingleberry! Follow through with your swing!"

"You gonna watch TV all night, Dingleberry?"

That son-of-a-bitch had duped me for all of those years.

* * *

Long before he was going cross-country, my dad's first job was mowing graveyards, like his father before him. A few times a week, Dad, Uncle Tom, and Grandpa, would load into the family's '57 Ford pickup, a trio of push-mowers lined up in the truck bed behind them. They'd carve and trim around the headstones of nearly every church and county graveyard on their side of that muddy man-made swill, Lake Wappapello, and split the work and money three ways. Handshake contracts like these were how the Mossman family got by for years, once Grandpa quit his job at Jim Hogg's grocery because Mr. Hogg didn't like him to wear his cowboy hat to work. There were only a handful of times I ever saw the top of my grandfather's head.

But I only knew him as the gravel-voiced sweetheart who'd always shout, "Howdy, pard!" at first sight of me. The chain smoker with tan-tinted glasses and a pair

of overalls for every day of the week, quick to laugh and easy to love, who let me and my sister get away with murder. I never knew the man so stubborn he'd risk his family going hungry just to make a point.

As far as hats go, my dad prefers a ballcap: St. Louis Cardinals most of the time, but he doesn't care much what his clothes say. When I'm home, he'll come into the room wearing a t-shirt I'd have sworn I threw out or gave away years ago, bands and brands I'd long forgotten or at least stopped caring about: JNCO. Airwalk. Big Dogs. Umbro. No Fear.

"Where the heck did you find *that* shirt?" I'll ask and he'll deadpan something like, "Hmm... I don't know! In the laundry?" a thin smirk peeling across his face.

Smart-ass.

My mom has said for years, "You wonder where Matthew gets it," but "Oh, foot!" is all Dad's ever said back.

* * *

Monkey Butt. That was the other nickname he gave me, but Dad only laughs when I bring this up. His laugh is something like an asthmatic housecat: not quite a purr or hiss or growl, yet all of these at once. Then, silence. For the most part, you can't hear my father's laugh. Rather, you hear him catch his breath between shakes, his face burning a deeper and deeper red. When dad looks due for a Heimlich, you know something's really got him. If not, he'll just blow his lips like a horse and say, "Oh.... shoot!" or "That's just stupid."

Sometimes, I wonder if Dad might be faking these latter acts of resistance toward what he finds funny. If he might *want* to let himself go more often but somehow—

perhaps long before I was born—Dad’s ability to let loose was cauterized at its root, never allowed to bloom.

* * *

Here’s a funny story: When my parents were first married, Dad had a job working on a hog farm near the little nowhere town where he grew up, Wappapello, Missouri—one of those farms you can smell from a few miles off. My mom has told me there were nights when Dad came home from work that she didn’t even want to let him in the house. Nights she wanted to hose him off in the yard. Mom’s told me that on more than one occasion she made Dad strip down on the stoop, seal his work clothes in a bread-tied sack and leave them outside on the porch. It can’t be easy to find yourself hitched to hog shit stink. Can’t be easy to have your new wife run the other way when you get home. Dad didn’t keep that job for long.

* * *

My father’s father was a honky-tonk man. Weekend evenings, that cowboy hat was no careless eccentricity—it was a lifestyle. Those nights, you could catch Tom Mossman and a rolling band of local pickers stomping the stage in county road dives and sawdust saloons, thumping out any song they thought might get a few people moving. *Jam-ba-lyyyyye and a crawfish piiie and a filet gumbo!* Grandpa’d croon, and I’m sure more than a few young women gave him a good, long look.

Of course, these young women didn’t know that Tom’s wife and six kids were crammed into the family sedan in the parking lot just outside, close enough to hear the boom of the upright bass and kick drum, the howl of the rowdy crowd. They didn’t get to

watch the younger kids duck below the windows as a slow parade of drunks trickled by on the way to their cars.

My dad doesn't like to talk about this. About his father, in general. But, Mom will. Or at least she's told me the little Dad's been willing to tell her in the thirty years they've been acquainted: how cramped and uncomfortable it was to have all of those kids—the youngest maybe four or five, the oldest in her late teens—stuffed into the cab of that car for hours at a time. How boring it was to wait there, quiet and behaved, without knowing when their dad would come back. Without understanding why *he* was allowed to go inside and have fun with his friends while they were left to fog up the windows, recycling the same restless breath deep into the early hours of the morning—sleepy, but unable to sleep.

I can't help but see this as my grandmother's way of watchdogging her potentially wayward husband. Grandma's way of keeping Grandpa on the "straight and narrow path" he'd invoke from the pulpit every Sunday morning at Little Brushy Baptist Church. By forcing Tom to face his wife and six kids at the close of every Saturday night barnburner, Grandma could guarantee that her husband would always keep the faith. Always practice what he preached.

This isn't the only of my father's stories that's been delivered to me secondhand. Really, that's how I learn most things about him: any thought, feeling, or sentiment beyond, "I'm headin' up to Council Bluffs in the morning; Ohio by Thursday—water treatment plant out there." It's only when my mother speaks up in his stead that I begin to find a kind of logic to my father's worldview, when I begin to garner some idea of the "Matthew" that he must see.

In minor instances, say if Dad has seen me with a beer a few weekends in a row, Mom will say, “Your dad asked me the other day if I thought you were an alcoholic.” This claim is easy enough to dismiss. As far as I know, my Dad has never been drunk in his life, has never had a taste for the stuff. It makes sense that my weekend sipping might give him a bit of a spook. But should Dad wonder why he and I aren’t very close, if I even like him as a person, and Mom says, “Your dad wonders all the time if he might’ve made a mistake with the way he raised you,” or “Your dad asked me if you might’ve had more respect for him if he’d gone further than high school,” I can’t even put a name to how it makes me feel.

It isn’t just anger or irritation. It’s not simply guilt or deep remorse. It’s that troubled, righteous sensation one experiences when justice is gained through unjustified means—in this case, that my father is beginning to come to terms with his own shortcomings because he and his only son rarely speak.

* * *

It’s worth noting, though, that if my father had listened to his high school guidance counselor—if he’d applied and gone to college, I wouldn’t exist. Dad’s counselor at Twin Rivers High School was dead set on getting him into Arkansas State—she even filled out the application for him. The only thing left was for Dad to get his parents to sign off.

But, his parents shot him down. Didn’t want to hear another word about it. Despite the fact that Dad’s transcript was almost impeccable or that he’d be graduating in the top ten percent of his class that Spring; despite that he’d won awards for his paintings or that he’d received top honors in architectural drafting, advanced biology, the answer

was *no*. *You can't go to college*, they told him, as they had told and would tell any and all of Dad's five brothers and sisters who even bothered to ask. *You've got to get a job*.

So, I wouldn't exist if my father had ignored his parents' wishes—had, instead of signing on as a hired hand at a farm owned by a couple he knew from his father's church, forged his parents signatures and dropped that ASU application into the outgoing mail. It's unlikely that he and my mother would ever have met. Out of his parent's reach on the other side of the Arkansas state line, I can only assume that Dad would have preferred to spend his idle time with his new college buddies, cruising the streets of Jonesboro instead of hanging out with his kid brother, Keith, at Skate City in Poplar Bluff where Machele, a pretty brunette from the local high school worked the concession stand. I'm told she made one hell of a sno-cone.

* * *

When my older sister, Alicia, was a baby and I wasn't yet born, Dad took a second job delivering pizzas for Domino's. I only know this because there's a photo to prove it: Dad in a blue Domino's trucker hat, sporting the thin mustache he donned for a few months that year, then never again. Alicia, pouty-lipped and toothless in OshKosh overalls, gazing starstruck into the flashbulb.

When I think about that photo, I try to imagine my father at 26, just three years younger than I am now and already with his first child, delivering pizzas in the blood orange Dodge Aspen I knew from my early childhood, but I always come up blank. Sightless. I'm starting to wonder if maybe something in me doesn't want to imagine the man I knew as a kid or the man I know now performing a job that's so *beneath* him. Even

if it was just a job to pick up a little slack on the bills. I also hate to think of that oversized Hot Wheels car stunk up with pizza grease. Not to mention that mustache.

* * *

Through most of my childhood, my father was a cabinetmaker. In my bedroom today are the oak dresser he built for my sister when she was eight or nine and the stumpy nightstand that acted as our family room “entertainment center” for years. These cabinets, like everything else I ever saw my father build, including my sister’s childhood dollhouse and most of the furniture we had in our house growing up, are so well crafted they’d likely take more work to break apart than they did to put together. But, they’re not what one might consider “fancy.”

To explain: though my father was a painter and sketch artist in his late teens and early twenties, he was mostly a landscapes and portraits kind of guy. Idyllic Midwestern scenes coated onto crosscut and circular saws. Rolling fields of foxtail and ryegrass, a cluster of deer or cattle or goats grazing in the distance. Rust-colored gristmills and covered bridges. Corn stalks and old barns. Dad’s was sensible art that you could hang on the wall of a nice country home. Nothing too unexpected or strange. It just wasn’t cultivated in him.

What’s odd, though, is the fact that my dad was an artist for so many years—essentially from his childhood up until my sister and I were born—but I can’t recall a time he ever attempted to pass on any of his artistic knowledge along to me. Considering how much time I spent drawing little comics like “Tokey the Bear” and “Captain Weirdo & Weirdo Boy,” it certainly would’ve been more productive than the reality of my childhood: engines, hard labor, “responsibility,” sports. *Man Training*.

With baseball, it was “suit up to sit out.” In six seasons of play, the best team I was on was the one for which I played the least. I was not a hitter, nor a runner, nor a fielder, nor a baseman. I was a bencher. A pinch right fielder. An unused alternate. And despite the best efforts of my dad, my coaches, and even some of my teammates over the course of those years, my skill level rested solidly at nil.

And, to me, that was no big deal. Baseball wasn't my thing. I liked collecting baseball cards—Ozzie Smith, the back-flipping St. Louis shortstop, in particular—but it wasn't because I enjoyed playing, let alone watching the game. I collected the cards because I was taught to. Because whether I asked for them or not, I'd get a few packs in my stocking every Christmas, in my basket of eggs on Easter morning. And despite my aversion to the sport at large, collecting those little cardboard rectangles brought me some amount of joy. I liked the slick polypropylene packaging they came in, the hours I could spend cataloging and categorizing them by color or team or release date. I liked that at fifty cents a pack, my parents rarely resisted letting me toss a new set onto the treadmill at the grocery store. I liked that, in some small way, they gave my dad and I something to talk about. Even I wasn't particularly interested in what he happened to say. I mean, it was still baseball.

The actual game, though, was much more *drill* than *play* for me. At home, dad would drag me down to the wide field at the front of our property week after week to catch pop flies, field grounders, tweak my batting stance and swing, and inevitably get himself all worked up and pissed off at my inability to give a shit about any aspect of the game.

Of course, it didn't help that I was *his* kid and I *sucked*. Surely, that drove him nuts. It also didn't help that in order for me to play Dad had to drive thirty miles round trip to every practice and game only to watch his lameduck son sit alone and bored in the dugout, hardly looking up at the game or, possibly worse, gazing from right field at the clock ticking away on the scoreboard, at the moths fluttering hypnotically around the spotlights. An earful always awaited me for the long car ride home.

Luckily, my dad quit baseball for me when he made a threat that if I didn't shape up he wouldn't enlist me for the next season.

"Fine by me," I said and you could just see it in his eyes: a tiny flicker of rage, quickly doused out with regret and disappointment.

I have seen this look far too many times in my life to count. It was the same look Dad would get at the sight of my reaction when he tried to show me all the parts of a car engine or explain to me the importance of keeping a straight, consistent mowing path or the name, use, and location of every indistinguishable tool he kept hidden in the jumble of steel storage chests scattered throughout the garage. When he saw my eyes glaze over, my posture slump, or he heard me yawn.

"Just... just forget it," he'd say, "Go back in the house."

Recently, my mom told me that Dad's high school counselor had wanted him to be an art teacher. "But," the counselor allegedly said, "you shouldn't teach any grade below high school. You have no patience for children."

How Mrs. Whomevershe was could've known this fact, I have no idea, but, boy, what a premonition that was.

* * *

For a sizable chunk of my childhood, my sister and I were raised, day-to-day, almost exclusively by our father. At the time, Mom was working twelve-hour shifts at the hospital and two nights a week driving an hour back and forth to attend a satellite school for nursing. Tuesday nights, we'd tape *Home Improvement*, Mom's favorite show, since she couldn't watch it with us and Dad would sit in his chair with a short knife and an apple, divvying out slices for my sister and I to share or he'd microwave popcorn and we would share it from the Bundt cake pan I never saw used for any other purpose. Sometimes, if we were lucky, Dad would scoop a bowl of vanilla ice cream for each of us with a few Oreos crumbled over the top. I don't remember if my sister and I had to do or not do anything to earn this special treat. It seems more likely that Dad just got sick of us hovering while he tried to eat, sick of us begging for bites from his bowl.

Oddly, the happiest and most accessible memories I have of this time are nearly all connected to food—really bad food, though I loved it at the time: cold hot dogs with ketchup. Banquet TV dinners with a side of instant mashed potatoes. Bologna and mustard sandwiches on Bunny Bread. Freezer-burnt chicken nuggets, fish sticks, and frozen pizzas. Stuff that makes perfect sense to act as go-to staples for a young dad of limited resources who worked 8-5 lifting, measuring, and wrestling with heavy planks of wood. Who came home reeking of sawdust and wood glue, two little ones to feed and keep busy.

I still prefer to eat an apple with knife in hand, one slice at a time. Dad still eats popcorn from the same pan.

Besides the bad food, and I hate myself for saying this, the other memories I can most easily conjure up from those formative years revolve around battle scenes and

stand-offs: me, idly holding the fridge door open; him, leaping over the back of the living room couch when I defiantly refuse to shut it. The rattling sound of Dad's belt being torn off. The night I sat in my room waiting to be punished for so long that I fell asleep, sweat-soaked with fear. It would break my dad's heart to know that this is how I remember him. Break his heart because I think he would know that it was true.

I wonder if it's kindness or cowardice that hold our lingering familial grievances at bay. That keeps these kinds of confessions from rising to the surface long after we've matched or surpassed the height and stature of those who brought us up. Maybe it's that speaking up would require a breaking point. Or maybe it just doesn't come up in conversation.

But I know that, if given the chance, I wouldn't take it—that I'll never let these pages meet his glance because it would only cause my father more pain than he has earned. I'm no longer an embittered teenager, feigning deaf when I hear him call. I don't hold against him the many missteps he made as a young parent, grasping at straws. Yet, the echo of those years lingers between us. It's the sound we speak over the few times a year we actually speak.

I can't help but wonder what might have changed if Dad had confronted his father instead of remaining silent all of those years. If he'd had the chance to describe for his father those nights of shared breath and boredom in the unheated Ford, how bitter he felt waking up early Sunday morning to listen to the same father he'd seen drunk and reckless the night before stand behind a pulpit, caterwauling against the wages of sin, the precious sanctity of the family, the home.

I can't help but wonder what might have been different had Grandpa sought forgiveness for pruning Dad's apparent potential. For never pushing him to be more than a man who could work.

Perhaps the thing my father and I have most in common is our inability to broach the hard truths with the people they most apply to. If maybe he doesn't talk about his father for the same reasons I avoid the subject in conversation, myself: because there's too much pain and too much love to contend with once you go there. Best to keep things quiet.

* * *

Besides lime and wherever he's headed for the next week, Dad will talk sometimes about other jobs he's had, places he used to work. The long hours he and mom have put in. During planting season just after he and mom first got married—Dad, 22, and Mom just a few days over 18—Dad would work from six in the morning until nine at night opposite Mom's 7-to-7 night shift at Lucy Lee in Poplar Bluff—the same hospital she worked at for the next 20+ years. My sister and I were both born there. That first year, Dad's boss on the farm loaned him an old farmhouse as a raise in lieu of a boost in pay. He and Mom lived rent-free with their mattress on the floor and their clothing in boxes, their only heat source a rusty wood stove Dad had found in Grandpa's garage.

In the mid-eighties, after my Uncle Kenny's cabinet business folded and Dad lost his first job making cabinets, Dad became one among an unofficial band of cabinet men who roamed throughout the Southeast Missouri region from one tanking business to the next, commuting to places like Fairdealing and Naylor. Dudley, Dexter, and Doniphan—however far they had to drive to keep a steady paycheck coming in. These were the jobs

Dad “worked until they couldn’t afford to pay [him] anymore.” It was hand to wood to mouth for the whole bunch.

A few days after my sister was born, Dad bumped a table saw at work and sliced the side of his thumb down to the bone. “All the doc could do was cut the loose skin off,” he’s told me. The doctor directed him to take off from work for a month, enough time for his thumb to fully heal, but Dad went back the next day. “Couldn’t afford it,” he says, as he tends to say about a lot of things and I don’t doubt for a second that it’s true. When it happened, Mom was fresh out of the hospital, resting at home with their brand new baby girl, their firstborn. Maybe that’s what was on Dad’s mind when he made that slip: the simultaneous joy and terror of bringing a new life into this world. The overwhelming pressure to provide.

But growing up I didn’t always believe Dad when he’d stake a claim as to what we could and could not fit into the family budget. Even considering that when my sister and I were little, she’d take a shower with Mom and I’d take one with Dad to save money on the water bill, sometimes Dad’s position just felt like an excuse.

I learned recently that a year or so after my mom finished night school and started working full-time as a registered nurse, she brought up the idea of Dad going back to school, assuming that he’d be thrilled or at least intrigued at the prospect. But, at least according to her, Dad didn’t seem to know how to even contemplate the notion of the thing.

And it’s possible that he didn’t. Dad had been raised by a mother whose parents could only afford to send one child to college and chose not her—the overeager of the two—but her twin sister, who dropped out her first semester in. He was brought up by a

father who never went beyond the eighth grade and somehow raised six kids by stretching the scraps he made cutting grass and preaching part-time. Who never allowed his wife to take a job even if that's what she'd wanted. After graduation, each of my father's four older siblings walked off the gymnasium stage and right onto the factory line floor. Dreams were not on the table in the Mossman household. They were not to be discussed, if even considered. So my father has never been one to ponder his options. The answer *no* was branded into his blood.

Still, when Dad replied "What would I even go for? What else would I want to do?" when she offered him his first real opportunity to get a college education, Mom was baffled.

"That's up to you, Wayne. What do you want to do?" she asked and Dad only paused for a moment before forever closing the conversation: "We don't have the money."

* * *

Like Dad, my first job was working for my father. Sometime during my first few years of high school, after he'd pick up enough side jobs through contacts at church for the idea to appear reasonable, Dad decided to start his own cabinetmaking business. With little to no capital upfront to purchase even the necessary supplies and equipment, let alone hire another skilled employee, it was up to Dad alone to source, cut, fit, stain, and, unless I was available to help, install an entire room's full of cabinets—some weighing hundreds of pounds a piece—all by himself. The finished product was always a real marvel, but needless to say, as a business model this whole thing was doomed from the start. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As his lone employee, I'd "wake up" at six or seven Saturday mornings after staying up most of the night talking on the phone, playing video games, or watching a midnight marathon on MTV to ride bleary-eyed out to some far off work site with my dad. The job was five bucks an hour to sit around until he asked me to fetch a pair of pliers I could never find or hold a Lazy Susan unsteadily into place while he screwed it "flush" to the "stud" in the "wall." Sometime later in the day, I would rap my fist too hard or too soft on a marble countertop while Dad would shouted indiscernible instructions from inside the cabinet below me: "Make sure the L-joint is lined up with the base and the lip!"

I would look around for an L-ish-shaped object and, finding none, reply, "Ok... yup! You got it!"

"Is it lined up?" Dad would repeat and the strain in his voice told that he was placing his bets rightfully against me. I would look again. *Countertop? Check. Wall? Ok, we're good here.*

"Sure! Seems like it!" I'd say, praying my false confidence was justified, if only this once. Dad would sigh.

"Matt. Do you see a crack between this piece and the one next to it? That's all I need to know. This glue is gonna set any second."

"Oh! Yeah! There's a huge one!"

"Well shit, son!"

I knew to move out of the way when I heard that.

Most of my workdays with Dad were idle time. They were a game of waiting out the clock, exploring the empty houses, thinking about Mallory or Leslie or Ashley or

Brooke or my next major battle in *Final Fantasy VIII*. I'd always stay within earshot, but never close enough to judge whether or not my dad's frustrated thumping from deep inside the floor cabinets would soon lead into a tirade about my general lack of initiative or if, instead, he would emerge triumphant and pump his fist in masculine victory over the big wooden box that he'd been struggling to line up just right with the wall, the countertop, and the box's other box-shaped neighbors. If everything lined up plum, all was copasetic. Hell, we might even break for lunch.

After a year's time, when the cabinet business went under because Dad was burned out and couldn't keep up with the workload and demand, he decided to look into trucking school and, once hired, didn't come home for the first three months of the job. In his absence, the dynamic of the house shifted significantly. I, for one, found life at home far less tense and unnerving than it had ever been—*relaxing*, you might even say—, but Mom only noticed that nothing was getting done around the house. When he called home, she'd burn his ear off and Dad would call me up later, pissed, to list at length everything that I had or had not been doing. In this situation, however, the power was finally in my hands: I could just hang up. And I did. A few times. Enough times that Dad learned that if he wanted to have a relationship with me it would have to involve more than a one-sided scolding every other week. Still, whenever he was home, I tried to pretend he wasn't there.

I remember being sixteen and looking out of the living room window, watching my Dad play basketball on the hoop in the driveway. He was home for the weekend and had asked me to play as an offering of truce—I don't remember what for, only that I was angry, that I had flatly refused. It was clear to me even then, watching him run lay-up

drills, chasing the ball when it bounced into the woods, the leaves fluttering up around his feet, that he had expected that I would see him playing and want to get in on the fun. A few tosses into the hoop would smooth things out. But just like my father and his father, Dad and I are the same kind of stubborn. We both have the same capacity to bull down and hold tight to a grudge. I watched Dad play one-on-one against himself until I could stand to turn away. Later, he came back inside breathing heavy, so much exhaustion in his sigh.

Later that summer, my Aunt Lynn called from the hospital to warn us that my grandfather would be “leaving this life in the next few minutes.” Grandpa’d been smoking a few packs a day since age thirteen. He’d had two major heart surgeries in the handful of years leading up to Aunt Lynn’s call. There was nothing that could be done to keep his weakened heart at work. In his last few months, when Grandpa could stand his XXL overalls bowed out around his shriveling figure, one strap or the other falling to his side no matter how tight he cinched them. When he could walk he’d drag his oxygen tank into the bathroom to sneak a smoke. We all knew the end was coming soon.

After my mom, sister, and I had all loaded into the van to head to the hospital, I caught a glimpse of my father through the rearview mirror—his head down, rubbing at his eyes. I knew it wasn’t something that I was meant to see.

I assume that with the passing of any parent, the hardest thing to face is not what *was*, but what might have been different. The hundred or more “If onlys” those left behind are forced to contend with. After so many years of being distant, of rarely sharing words, the last chance for my father and his father to reconcile had been stifled. I’m certain Dad thought of that.

Looking at my father through that mirror, it seemed as though every regret and bitter feeling he'd felt toward his father had swelled into a hard knot in his throat. A knot that got stuck. That's yet to come undone. A knot as emblematic and invisible as the chronic pain in my father's back from decades of bending to lift more weight than one man should ever handle on his own.

Part 6: Cancer Makes for Crummy Small Talk

has fumbled down the stairs and back into your parents' basement, accept with grace any kind gesture your mother offers from her Wal-Mart bags. It's only a few bars of soap and for the first time in days she is smiling.

When you're twenty-three and living back at home with your parents and your mother's buying strengthening shampoos and serums to hold off clumps of hair that keep coming out in her fists, remember that even moments you might assume to be meaningless are now drawn so taut that they are brittle to the touch. Remember that every thoughtless thing you utter—"I like the stuff I've got"—has the power to sever something unseen. Lift the three-bar pack of soap from the counter and say thank you, that you'll take this right upstairs.

As you walk toward the stairwell in your parents' new home—the one they bought when, despite their reluctance, you stuffed your red Chevy hatchback with all your clothes and instruments and teenage gut feelings and drove toward the western side of the U.S.—do not pause in your sickly mother's line of sight. Do not for a moment fixate your eyes, furrow your brow at the box of soap she purchased for you as a gift—the once familiar logo, the scrawl of letters from a box beneath a sink in your childhood in the bathroom with a shower always dotted with specks of motion, with crickets and spiders and inch worms, easily rinsed away though only you would do it. If Mom asks if she picked the right brand, did a good job, feign loyalty if you must. *The only thing I ever use, Ma. You didn't have to do that, thanks again.*

Just use the stuff until it's gone. In a couple of months, you can buy your own. Soap, I assure you, disintegrates much swifter than the memory of rejecting a favor from a mom who believes she is dying—a memory that even through the next five years of

removal, remission, recovery, and recurrence will linger as an invisible residue beneath your skin.

Like I Said

The day after my wife and I split up, I drove home to Missouri from South Carolina and my father taught me everything he's ever learned about sex.

"I didn't last long at first," he told me, leaning around a table lamp between the his & hers recliners in my parents living room to meet my eye, "so eventually I learned that you have to make sure she gets off before you do."

This was the first lesson. I did not write it down. Nor the others, like, "You have to learn what she likes—what you've gotta do to get her in the mood."

Upstairs, my mother, the only woman he could possibly be referring to, slept in their bedroom for the second or third time that day, exhausted merely from being awake.

* * *

Many years earlier (fifteen, to be exact), Mom had tried to force this conversation between my dad and I. She'd sent me to my room apropos of nothing, telling me only that my "father needed to talk to me about something" before turning to Dad who replied, dumbfounded, "I do?" I was a preteen, but I waited on the edge of my bed as though the long-retired practice of spanking was about to make sudden resurgence into my life.

By the time he reached my doorway, I'd pieced together what was about to take place and I burst into laughter before he could even cross the threshold. Dad threw his hands up, nearly sprinted in the other direction, shouting, "I can't do this, Machele!" My mom cackled from the kitchen. The metaphorical significance of birds and bees still

eludes me. It seems hard to imagine these two very different creatures getting it on. *Is it something about the stinger?* That seems violent. Hm.

Back in the recliners that May, my dad told me that he and my mom used to have sex, “maybe six or seven times a week,” when they first got married. When he told me this, what he was really saying was, “It used to be that way and now it isn't.” He was saying, “Your mother and I used to go at it like stray dogs in a back alley.”

My mother and father used to go at it like stray dogs in a back alley. Even figuratively speaking, this made me uncomfortable. Sitting forward on the recliner my mother had used just hours earlier to prop up her fluid-swollen legs, my father said, “Five years in, it was maybe once a week. Ten years, it was once a month. Then, a few times a year. And now, well...”

I tried to stifle the squirm working its way up from my gut, to my chest, and out to my every limb—to live in this feeling, bobbing my head toward him in a steady, contemplative rhythm, keeping my eyelids set to a width I hoped read as unshakable, resolute. My father has never been an open book, so his broach of this topic, so incredibly taboo to discuss with his only son, made it immediately apparent that Dad needed this conversation even if I did not. That, because Mom is sick and no one knows what’s going to happen and Dad spends all of those hours alone on the road and Mom’s the only person he ever really talks to, his best and maybe only friend in the entire world, at that moment, he needed me to be his confidant, his buddy, more than his offspring.

Still, that didn’t make it any easier to have a conversation about my cancer-stricken mother’s vagina. Or any activities related to it, for that matter.

* * *

My mother would say that my dad and I were both born with our feet in our mouths. Besides our near identical height and similarly sharp canine teeth, our tendency to speak or act without thinking may be the thing my dad and I have most in common. Both of us have answered incorrectly the question, “Do I look fat in this?” The wrong answer, of course, being anything beyond an emphatic, “No!” Within both my father and I is a compulsion to spew unfiltered truth, particularly when and where brutal honesty is completely inappropriate and/or unwarranted. There are times when people only want to hear false praise or reassurance. These are the times we fail the most. “Oh, it’s just a small dent!” comes out, “Bet they try to charge you for a whole new bumper. Crooks,” or, best case scenario, “That was a great song!” comes out, “That was pretty good! Couple slip ups, but you made it through!” It isn’t as though we *only* notice the negative; it’s just our first and strongest thought. My father doesn’t *want* to point out the inconsistent stain on his brother’s newly-installed kitchen cabinets any more than I want to offer suggestions on how my significant other could improve a meal she’s only cooking to impress me in the first place, but the truth spew is a unstoppable force. So much stronger than the weak censor that operates the gate between our brains and our throats. It’s as though the positive elements of a situation are so obvious, so readily apparent, they don’t even cross our minds as something necessary to note. In turn, both my father and I have, at one time or another, been deemed “overly critical” and/or “ungrateful” and/or, simply, “an ass.”

Christmas, in particular, is a booby trap for the both of us. Even in saying nothing we give ourselves away. An attempt at false sincerity tends to be an even more egregious offense. In high school, a month or so before the holiday, my mother beckoned me to the

family computer and asked my opinion on a picture of an electric guitar she'd pulled up. The guitar on the screen was jet black and sleek, a decent brand, good pickups, etc., but along the entire length of the guitar's fretboard was a swirling flame mother-of-pearl inlay that looked like a tattoo one of the member's of the boy band 98° might have had wrapped around his bicep. It was hideous. The only thing I had asked for Christmas that year was a guitar, so I assumed that my mom was just window shopping, feeling out what I liked and didn't like. So when she asked, "What do you think?" I tried to be helpful and said, "The body is cool, but that design on the neck is awful." And when she asked, "Could you see yourself playing it?" I replied, "Not without feeling embarrassed." Christmas morning, I lost my color when I pulled a guitar from a huge box beneath the tree, tribal-tatted neck first. She'd already ordered the thing when she showed me the picture but hoped I'd be happy just to get anything. Seeing my face fall as I unsheathed the guitar, Mom flipped.

* * *

When I arrived home from South Carolina that May, my mom greeted me with a weak smile at her open garage door wearing a fuzzy headwrap that looked like an upside down diaper cut from an Old Navy fleece, her eleven-year-old peekapoo yapping beneath her feet. Emaciated and pale from months of being bedridden and in and out of intensive care, my mother's head and neck looked superimposed onto someone else's body like a poorly spliced "before and after" photo. A bad edit that rendered her torso and extremities a being unto themselves. A transport vessel for the relic of what my mother used to be.

In early March, around the time my wife and I began a trial separation, my mother was assigned to an experimental treatment group for the cancer in her sternum that had refused to shrink despite more than a year of multifarious chemo cocktails and radiation therapy. She'd called in early January to tell me that a spot had been found near the bottom of her lung. It was a gut punch to all of us, including her doctors, and in response, they decided to take a risky, more aggressive approach to her treatment. But the body can only endure so much. So while my wife and I argued as to who should move out of our apartment and who should stay, my mother's organs began to fail one by one. Her body swelled with her own unfiltered waste, so much fluid that a surgeon had to install a drain into her side to leech out what her body could not and should not contain.

If she could answer when I called home during that time, my mother would immediately ask about my marriage and without thinking I would bury her in a desperate, unhinged scree. It was impossible to imagine her speaking to me from a hospital bed until her voice cracked somewhere in her response and I could hear the empty, sterile ambience of the room she laid in echo back unfamiliarly. Rarely did I ask her how she was feeling before I had exhausted her. Before all she would or could reply was, "I'm ok. I've gotta go."

* * *

Some time in early high school, my mom came into the living room, turned off the TV, and said with a sharp look in her eye, "Matthew, we need to talk and I want the truth." I had no idea what I had done, but it was immediately clear from my mom's behavior that it went well beyond my typical neglecting of the dishwasher or the lawn. I sat swallowed by our overstuffed, floral-pattered sofa seat, trying to trace my mother's

face for a sign of what I should be guilty for this time, but I couldn't read her and couldn't recall anything I'd recently attempted to cover up or get away with. Either this infraction was something long since buried or, if it were even conceivable, I might actually be innocent.

“Before I ask you this, I'm going to give you a chance to fess up,” she said and I buoyed my eyes between her furrowed brow and a patch of carpet directly in front of the TV, trying to come up with anything worthy of the disturbingly unfamiliar tone of her voice and phrasing. Typically, if mom was pissed, hell rained down. The accusation was direct, “MatTHEW! GET IN HERE! WHAT IS THIS?! IS *THIS* WHERE CLOTHES BELONG?!” I would instantly know what I did wrong and would be given prompt instructions on how to remedy my mistake and what punishment was to follow. So when she asked “Is there anything you've been doing that you want to tell me about?” I could only shrug and mutter, “No?”

When she asked, “Anything you've been looking at on the computer?” I tried to avoid looking guilty, something I've struggled with since before I could speak, or so I'm told. I couldn't recall the last time I'd snuck upstairs in the middle of the night to jerk off to something I found on the internet and, even more reassuring, I could run circles around both my parents when it came to basic computing, so I knew I'd covered whatever tracks I might have made however long ago I might have made them. I felt fairly safe in shaking my head in response. “Are you *sure*?” she replied, then added, “If I go ask your dad about this and he says it wasn't him, your ass is fire, you hear me?” I heard her.

When brimstone failed to fall upon my pubescent buttocks any time in next week, I began to wonder if Mom had even had the guts to talk to my dad about whatever she'd

found, so one night as I passed her sitting in the overstuffed chair while I gathered up the trash, I said, “Mom did you ever figure out,” and she interrupted with, “Yes, Matthew. It was your dad,” and then, “Your father is the pervert, not you, thank God.”

Whether it was accurate or not, her statement was a welcome balm to my guilty conscience.

* * *

A few years after he turned 50, my dad bought himself a Harley Davidson Road King. Since I was a kid, he and my mom had bought and traded several other adult-sized toys—used ski boats and campers, primarily—but all of these purchases had been decided between the two of them, had been bought for use by the family, and unlike the Harley none of them had been kept for very long. “Before that Harley, your dad had never asked for anything for himself,” my mom once told me and sifting through the vague mental inventory I had of my father’s Christmas presents from years past, this statement rang more than true. How many pocketknives, belts, and wallets could one guy possibly use up in one year?

I’d never seen my dad as little kid excited as I did when I came home to visit and he finally got to show me his bike. Though he knew from experience that I have no interest in anything flashy or gear-related, he took the time to point out every tiny aftermarket accessory he’d added to his bike—an \$80 strip of chrome there, a \$40 snap-on logo here—and even talked about what parts he planned to swap out over time. The bike, by my view, seemed to have a plethora of perfectly adequate, shiny pieces as it stood, but I didn’t push the subject. It was great to see him so uncharacteristically giddy.

Over the next few years, even after my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, even after she had a full mastectomy and reconstructive surgery, after she lost her hair and, temporarily, her sense of herself as a woman, they rode the bike whenever they could, taking weekend trips to nowhere in particular, longer trips with my mom's younger brother and sister, each with a Harley of their own, to scenic sites and stretches of road known among bikers for their challenge and thrill, to other, more practical motorists for their inconvenience.

In my parents living room that May, Dad said, "Your Mom did the motorcycle for me," and I knew but didn't know what he really meant. When he'd talked to me about he and my mother's sex life, he'd done it methodically, measuring out the shift in frequency and pattern over time in order to illustrate what I should have expected from my marriage, even if it had already ceased to exist save the paperwork. He wanted me to have something to compare to. To be of use. When speaking about the bike, though, he looked at the ground. His voice softened. "She doesn't like it much anymore," he said, his mouth twisting into a defeated grimace. "She gets scared easier now. Not as daring."

He told me about a recent trip they'd taken with my uncle and his new wife to the Blue Ridge Mountains more to avoid the guilt of a last minute cancellation than for the enjoyment of the ride or vacation. After riding for a couple of hours along the Blue Ridge Highway, the constant slopes and curves became too much for my mom and she cut the ride short. She and my dad spent the next few days of the trip trailing my uncle in the F-250 they'd used to haul the Harley up to the mountains from home. When the foursome reached "The Dragon's Tail"—an 11 mile stretch of road containing 318 curves, infamous among bikers and sports car enthusiasts—Mom and Dad parked the truck at a

gift shop and waited for my uncle and his new bride to make the ride down and back. They headed home the next day.

* * *

He may not notice it, but in conversation my dad has a habit of beginning sentences with the phrase, “like I said.” Oddly, this short phrase is often the first set of words my father speaks in a given conversation, even in cases where the person or people he is speaking with are complete strangers or individuals he has not seen or spoken with in months. Over lunch on Christmas day at my grandmother’s church, he’ll listen from a distance as a few of my uncles grieve over one another’s engine-related woes and when they look to Dad he’ll say, “Like I said, I’ve never had an issue with my Ford doin’ nothin’ like that,” or “Like I said, anymore I just go to the dealership. These new cars.” When he says the phrase, the syllables all get so mashed up that the short burst—“lackased”—might slip right past the untrained ear. But not mine.

“Like I said” is a phrase that obviously implies that whatever sentiment is to follow has been previously stated. It’s a phrase utilized when the person speaking is looking to rehash or repeat themselves for emphasis or simply because they don’t have anything more to say, their point has been made. For my father, though, “like I said” seems to be the sticky non-sequitur that binds together his every thought. The kinetic momentum that continues the conversation he believes is being had, even if no one else may be on the same page—a conversation that exists inside my father’s mind alone, unshared even as he attempts to communicate with those around him. It’s as if through this one simple phrase he is referring to every other thing he is not saying, has never said, will never say.

“The chemo has made a lot of things go away,” my father said and I didn’t press him. “It’s gone,” he said and I told him I knew. That mom had told me. Not exactly, but enough. We sat in silence for a long moment neither of us looking at the other and I started to wonder whether or not the conversation we’d been having in these recliners was over and we’d moved into something new. A conversation where we didn’t speak. Where we could utter without words everything unsaid between all of those “like I said.”

Dad made a snuffle or a snicker, said, “That motorcycle is one of the few things left that makes me feel like a man.” He looked up at me, seemed surprised at his own phrasing, added, “The adrenaline. Testosterone,” then, scoffing, “I guess that’s sex for me now.” I nodded and tried not to seem phased. Said, “Huh.” Dad flicked the TV on to cut the silence. Its presence filled the gaps between our thoughts, forced us to make observations outside of ourselves. Much closer to what we are used to.

Midwestern Love

To the uninitiated observer a Midwestern goodbye may seem to lack emotion. A mother and son, a son and father, a grandson and grandfather will embrace at medium grip, the elder saying, "Gimme call" or "Be safe," the younger, simply, "OK," and the pair will depart for months or even years on end. Or at least this is how my family would seem to prefer it. They'd prefer to mask their true sentiment beneath the cliché of Midwestern stoicism. "Save the crying for the road," I can imagine my mother saying to herself as she gives me the double-pat-around-the-shoulder typically saved for relatives only seen at funerals and visitations before hopping into her rental car or walking toward the arrival gate, her hand rising to wipe her eyes letting me know that she almost didn't make it.

Sometimes I wonder if the physical distance I've long placed between my family and myself has slowly coaxed them into becoming tender. If people only really learn how to love you when you're gone.

I come from a family which hugs but who are not huggers. Huggers, by definition, are those who offer their arms to any person to whom they hold a remote sense of affection and/or closeness. *I* am a hugger. And unlike my dead-fish-back-patting forebears, I'm a *tight* hugger. My girlfriend, a rather tiny human being, might say a little too tight. In her case, bone-crushing. But love hurts. At least I am told that it should.

For my family, though, hugs are like bookends: the physical pressure that holds the whole thing together. Tossing one into the middle of the shelf is just unnecessary,

impractical. Like a comedian's opening joke and closer, our hugs of greeting and farewell are the high notes of the stage show of our familial interaction. They set the tone for the time we have or will spend together; enact an understanding that regardless of what happens between now and when the visitor/s leave/s, we're all going to keep liking each other. Even if sometimes we don't. Which, these last few years, is rarely, if ever. I mean, just bring it in here.

* * *

In high school, my friends and I hugged constantly. Were so affectionate with one another that those outside of our small flock, even our parents and siblings, began to question the real reason none of us had a girlfriend. They'd say, "Can't he sleep on the couch?" or "Y'all sure do act funny." At school, of course, this kind of teasing carried with it a slightly more menacing timbre. When the 5 or 6 of us were all together and the typical homophobic arsenal was volleyed in whispers and shouts down the hallway or across the parking lot, we thought it was hilarious. A jock-lobbed accusation might warrant in reply a hand-over-mouth make out between two of us. Or a blown kiss that became a middle finger. Or some kind of indiscriminate dry humping into the air. Alone, though, at least for me, someone calling out "fag!" from the other end of the hallway was an undeniable threat to my as-yet unpummeled existence. A warning to skip the bathroom break I'd just asked for and head back to SciGate with Mr. Gray.

I've come up with a few theories over the years as to why, despite our prolific and unabashed affection toward one another, despite the fact that, regardless of setting or situation, when we embraced one or both of us would bite into the other's shoulder or grab the other's butt, no real threat of violence was ever enacted upon any of us. For

some time, I assumed we must have been viewed as unified front, untouchable by sheer volume alone. But while we were certainly tight-knit and numerous, I feel safe in assuming that someone who would punch you just for being “faggy” wasn’t too concerned with or even aware of our cohort. Which is another feasible theory: that no one knew or cared that we existed. This seems highly plausible. My high school wasn’t large—maybe 1000 students—and the members of my very touchy crew numbered just over five. At half of one percent of the school’s population, we would’ve had drop trouh and go at it on the tennis court for more than a select few people to even raise an eyebrow.

But these ideas are too easy, too ribbon-tied and palatable. What’s much harder for me to consider is that though my group considered many of our actions subversive and taboo (hugging included), we were really no different than the slap-ass-happy jocks that I ducked or kept at a distance when walking around PBHS with a hall pass. That we were just “boys being boys,” safe in pretending to other ourselves for kicks.

* * *

After high school, the hugging stuck even if the friends did not. Maybe not the practice, but certainly the compulsion: the desire to pull in close those that I hold dear. But once I moved out of the region and, perhaps more importantly, out of adolescence, offering open arms to my close male friends seemed if not outright unwanted, at least culturally uncouth. Possibly even more than with my parents, hugs were reserved only for the most momentous and rare occasions—weddings, deaths, final farewells.

* * *

When I go home, I have to remind my father how he taught me to hug. The old man’s gone soft with age. Doesn’t vice me in his arms. No longer has the untamed clutch

of an animal that doesn't know its own strength pretending to be a man who loves his kin. As a kid, my father's hugs weren't always pleasant. More often, they were not. Dad would grab me, growling, his enormous, stubby fingers digging into my sides, would lift me high off of the ground and squeeze my ribcage against his until I was liable to burst my guts onto the upholstery below. He would grind his stubble into my cheek until I howled for him to stop. Hugs from Dad often ended in tears, Mom coming into the room to ask what the hell happened. I learned to run screaming (a mixture of delight and genuine fear) when Dad would say, "I know what you need... A BIG OL' BEAR HUG!" These days, Dad's grip has gone loose, hardly detectable by comparison. I squeeze him hard, back into the past. He growls in response, crushes the breath out of my lungs.

* * *

My Grandma Mossman likes to hold hands during conversation. We talk during holidays, she, an otherwise silent observer of the milling generations born from she and my grandfather meeting on the playground, him saying to a friend, "I'm going to marry that girl one day," and holding onto the idea for years, across state lines and other distances and Grandma sustaining through the harder years when Grandpa drank and partied at honky-tonks and left she and the kids to wait outside in the car. Sometime after I left Missouri, Grandma and I started having these holiday chats. Grandma calls it "visiting." For me, visiting began as a natural reprieve from the overcrowded, small talk-infested clusterfuck that happens anytime my Dad's side of the family attempts to come together in the same location. Grandma was a welcome, sincere point of focus. The keeper of the story of hers and my family.

But I am not the only person whose hand she will reach for, no matter how awkward or strained her reach may be. She reaches for any and all of her kin, whether speaking with them or not. Longs for a physical connection to the bloodline that she sees so few and far between. It wasn't always like this. There was a time where Grandma was content with being quiet. Content to keep her hands to herself. But in the decade plus since my grandfather passed, she too has found herself struggling through illness and injury, surprised and grateful with each waking.

The first time I can remember my grandmother holding my hand was what I thought would be the last time. I had rushed home from college at the news that she'd had a heart attack (not her first), that they'd had to perform a risky, emergency surgery, that "this might be it." When I arrived, Grandma stirred in her hospital bed, followed me with her eyes as I made my way toward her, lifted her fingers to reach for me, whispered, "Hey, Matthew" as though there weren't tubes dangling from her face. As though she was just glad to see her grandbaby, was hoping we could get a visit in.

* * *

When my mom got sick, each embrace between she and those around her became garnered with a certain socio-political weight. She quickly became hypersensitive to anything she perceived as pity, anything remotely insincere. In a simply phrase or gesture, she could read a tome's worth of toned deafness, insensitivity, or impropriety. She would snarl about what her mother or someone at work might have said or done to her. About the way someone had patted her shoulder or said, "I'm praying for you."

In contrast, at the right moment, she would fall into you. Collapse and leave your shirt wet and stained with mascara. Shake and scream into your chest. It was best to say

very little in these moments. To clutch your grip into her back, not simply rest your hands upon her, not rap your hand across her like she was just a little girl who'd dropped her ice cream in the mud. The wrong word or touch could result in hands pushed against your chest. A look of disgust or disbelief. A turned back. A shout to leave her the fuck alone.

But this was the beginning, years back at this point. Before the sick and the pain and the chemo and the remission and return and remission and return. Before her body shut down as doctor's attempted to make her well. Now, when I go home, she pats my back when we hug goodbye. Humors me as I wrap my arms around her anytime she's within reach. Drifts between being there and not there, speaking and not speaking, awake and asleep, whether in her bedroom or mid-sentence.

Post-Op

My sister is in bed crying and I can't think of what to say. We're in post-op. In a room that isn't a room, that's just a border of blue curtain pulled closed and my sister—when I can bring myself to look at her—is all wet cheeks, two glinting stripes painted out from her eyelids.

If Alicia speaks at all, it's to my mother, the stronger nerve and stomach between the two of us who've come to be there when she wakes up. The words between them are few: circuitous variations of, "It hurts," and, "I know, baby," a nurse interrupting here and again to see if the pain meds have kicked in, check vitals, and ask if Alicia might be ready to go home soon. "God, they just shove you out the door, don't they?" my sister says, choking, her blanket-buried arms crossed beneath bandages that wrap over her chest. I can't see anything below Alicia's neckline, but it's clear she feels exposed.

When I look away—out through a small opening in the privacy curtain—I watch nurses pass between other not-rooms where more women wake up hurting just like my sister. Behind every curtain a woman is waking for the first time with part of her body altered or removed. A woman, barely conscious, is being asked again and again if she "think[s] [she] can stand up and get [her] clothes on."

It's hard to tell whether post-op nurses are perky or insincere. They remind me of the tellers at Trader Joe's—so confident and jovial I always fear I'm being punked. Like I've got a sample-sized portion of blueberry cobbler dangling from my left cheek and they don't say word, just *smile*, ask me how I've been, maybe talk up the ten-dollar OJ,

all to savor in my dumb luck. Post-op, on the other hand, doesn't have time for conversation. Post-op is a conveyor belt. You will be pulled along at their speed whether you're ready to be checked out or not.

* * *

The day prior, I sit in the waiting room of a different clinic on the other side of town trying to read while Mom undergoes a same-day procedure she's been through once before, earlier this year. This time, she's here just to make sure nothing's changed. Our hope is to leave today absent of more bad news. My family being in Missouri and me in South Carolina, I'm not normally around appointments like this, but since Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer six years ago, the invasive exploration of her body has become a regular thing. Today, I am the unusual part of her routine.

On the waiting room TV, Drew Carey's doling out ski trips and kitchenware and *Brand. New. Caaarr!*s and looking like someone forgot that he was "Dry Clean Only." Like someone washed and dried the old Drew on *Very Hot*. I've got headphones in, but I can't help but hear about "all the fabulous prizes." I have to keep the volume low enough to hear the tiny intercom tucked behind a houseplant in the corner. I'm waiting for the plant to say, "Mossman family to the recovery room," even though I'm here on my own.

When I arrive by her bedside, Mom is out cold. A nurse is patting her shoulder, imploring her to wake up, come on now, dear, it's time to wake up, etc. The nurse's best efforts earn her the lift of a single eyelid that flaps shut much quicker than it rose. The night before, Mom mentioned that during her last visit to this clinic whatever they'd knocked her out with had worn off before her procedure was even halfway complete. "It was like being paralyzed," Mom told me, "I couldn't move or speak." She felt as though

her eyes were wide open, her mind and her body awake for the worst of the whole thing. On the way into town this morning, Mom reminded me that “We’re not doing that shit again,” so watching the nurse rather aggressively try to stir her, give up, then exit the privacy curtain with a coy smile, saying, “I’m sure she’ll wake up in a couple minutes,” I could only wonder if the doc had mistakenly given Mom an overdose or just dripped her the good stuff to make damn sure she kept it “lights out.”

Since the nurse left no apparent instructions, I sit down on the chair next to Mom’s bed and listen to her breath crackle in and out of her open mouth. After a few minutes go by, I start to feel strangely guilty. Like I’m not where I’m supposed to be. Like maybe they’ve called me back here too early. I’m almost embarrassed for my mom. Another few minutes pass and I’m starting to worry that I might have missed some sort of signal or cue from the nurse. That I may have implicitly been assigned a task that I not only don’t know how to do, but that I don’t feel a particular urge to try and figure out. I expect the nurse to return any moment and tear me a new one for letting Mom catch a few more Zs instead of following her example and scream-speak into my mother’s face, cataleptic as it could ever be.

I’m not completely wrong.

The nurse comes back incredulous. Just flabbergasted that a patient so heavily doped up isn’t spry and on her feet, isn’t awaiting her return with an array of topics for polite conversation, arm outstretched for her next blood pressure check. “MACHELE!” the nurse...*says*. “YOU NEEDED TO WAKE UP. COME ON NOW, DEAR. IT’S TIME.” I fight the urge to tell the lady to take it down a notch even though it goes against everything in my nature to be confrontational toward living things that can speak or even

breathe. In my head, I remind myself that it's this nurse's job to yell at people who'd rather be asleep. For all I know, it may have taken years of training and experience for her intonation to get so sharp, so unsettling it could wake an icecubed Cro-Magnon man at rest beneath our feet. Who am I to tender a note of critique?

* * *

Alicia's getting herself worked up anticipating the pain of the ride home from the clinic. She's made the trip before, a few weeks back. "I felt every little bump," she says, "Every little rock of the car was like someone put a lit match on my chest." This is her second visit to this post-op unit, the second time she's had her breasts opened up, some part of her removed.

It's December now, a few days after Christmas, and the last time I've been home to Missouri was just a few months back. Since things have continued to escalate in terms of Mom's health, I've been coming back much more often than I ever have since I moved out at nineteen. My last visit, Alicia and I met up for lunch at a coffee shop in downtown Cape Girardeau, a few blocks up from the slow brown swell of the Mississippi. It's a family-run shop, where the mom makes killer chicken and dumplings that are near impossible to catch as they're served only once a week on no specific day. Her coconut crème pie, on the other hand, is ubiquitous and I am ever hopeless to resist. In the corner of the dining room sits an upright piano that anyone willing is welcome to play—a potentially dangerous policy, though I've never heard it abused.

"Cozy, huh?" I say to Alicia once we've sat down and ordered our food.

She's distracted by a wall-sized piece of art hanging up behind me that at best I can say involves painted buckeyes and a three-dimensional human face.

“That’s kind of weird,” she replies.

Alicia’s wearing a St. Louis Cardinals jacket that seems two sizes too big for her and a pair of light blue jeans that look proportionally similar. It’s hard to tell if she’s lost weight or if, like a shoplifter or a pregnant teen, she might be hiding something beneath her oversized clothing. As we wait for our server, she plays with her phone, checks Facebook, laughs at and mentions a few posts that she’s reading, pictures she sees, but otherwise rarely looks up. I fight the temptation to do the same. Even when she isn’t bent to read whatever might appear on her smartphone screen, I notice that Alicia sits with her shoulders curled in, her back hunched forward. It isn’t just the art on the wall that seems to make her uncomfortable.

Here and there, she asks a me a few questions—how life is going, how I’m doing in school—and I can’t help but spill my every wide-eyed thought, circling back on each and every unprovoked tangent—why I do and don’t think I would make a good teacher because it’s a lot like being on stage and even though as a kid I always wanted to do stand up and I won those talent shows in sixth grade and I was in that Abbott and Costello skit that killed in the middle school vaudeville play, I’ve never been good at public speaking, like so bad I made a D in Speech at Three Rivers, but that was mostly because I didn’t come to class, my dumb way of telling Mom that I didn’t care that it was free to go to community college because I felt like a loser who was never going to get out of that shit town and was worried that like most of the people I was in class with I’d waste the next five years on a meaningless associate’s or maybe just give up, get so bored that there’d be nothing better to do than start using meth like I heard happened to Robby Hickman and that guy Kyle and Derek Ramos, all those guys you graduated with, the

ones who hung out where the band kids always stood, I found out the other night from my buddy Kevin, who still goes down there to see his Mom, about this long list of people I barely remember that stuck around town and tried to make it and all ended up strung out and trapped, almost like Poplar Bluff is *Winter's Bone* country now, like it's *Breaking Bad* or something—until even I can't remember where I began or how I landed where I've ended up. I can't help but talk to my sister like she's someone I've just met—someone who makes me nervous and awkwardly talkative because I want them to like me even though I'm at a loss when it comes to understanding what they're all about. Alicia and I haven't spoken for five months, since the last time I came home and we met up for lunch at a Mexican buffet place near my Mom's house that Alicia picked out.

“You think too much,” my sister concludes, as our food arrives and I finally shut my mouth.

“Yeah. Maybe,” I reply.

We eat in silence for a few minutes. Some guy sits down at the upright piano and I'm almost certain he's started playing, “Chopping Broccoli,” from *Saturday Night Live* in the early '90s. Alicia and I used to watch *SNL* reruns every afternoon during summers growing up. We'd waste entire days flipping back and forth between MTV and Comedy Central, she almost as interested in the wonderfully bizarre Canadian sketch show *Kids in the Hall* as I was and likewise for me when it came to the Spice Girls and Third Eye Blind.

“You remember this song?” I ask Alicia, expecting to share a laugh together, remember all those summers, all of those dumb sketches and music videos we used to watch.

“You know, ‘Choppin’ broccalay! Choppin’ broccalayhay!” I sing to her.

Alicia giggles at, but not with me: her weird little brother who’s always been weird and who the hell knows why. At least that’s what I read from her lifted eyebrows. The shake of her head. Her widened, rolling eyes.

“*SNL?*” I try one last time, “Dana Carvey?”

We go back to eating. The guy at the piano doesn’t stop. If anything, he’s gotten louder, is pounding his hand down with wildly increasing force each time he cycles through the song’s four somber chords. His right hand is plucking out the Piano 1 melody with the verve of a classical master.

There’s length of wall blocking our table in, so I can’t see what the guy looks like who’s seated at the throne, the guy running the same progression over and over to the point that it’s become almost maniacal, almost an affront to the few people talking quietly in the seats scattered around the shop. Like we’re all just playing a role in some kind of guerilla performance art piece. “Sad Soundtrack for Dull Conversation,” he might call it. “False Gravititas in B \flat Minor.” It’s gotten so repetitive that I’m starting to resent the piano guy, but somehow in a way that makes it hard not to smile. I can’t deny that the piano guy’s doing something special. Whether he realizes it or not, he’s pulling off one of the most difficult coups possible in the art of comedy: a marathon joke that loses an audience on purpose, embracing the power of shared awkwardness that arises when a flat premise is drawn out so long that it warps into the uncanny, brings a momentarily hesitant audience to its knees—Andy Kaufman’s “Eating Ice Cream” comes to mind. Tig Notaro’s “Pushing a Stool.” In my head, I can’t help but picture Carvey, himself, sitting in the corner of this little coffee shop, playing for an audience of seven the same as he

would for several thousand—bending deep into the ivories, lips formed into Elvis’ curl, eyebrows caught in a menacing tango, hair standing up on the crown of his head—,even the smallest details of his performance so melancholic and absurd.

Alicia and I are debating whether or not to have dessert. The choice, for me, is obvious. In a moment, I head to the front counter to put in the order, afraid that the next time our server might roam by he’ll be bringing us the check.

“Mom tell you I decided to get my boobs cut off?” Alicia asks with a giggle just moments after I come back.

* * *

Mom’s full-throated nurse has sent me down the hallway, to a room papered with anatomical diagrams of the digestive system, the most pathetic-looking of which is a model afflicted with every known gastrointestinal disease and disorder—Crohn’s, pollups, appendicitis, the works. Poor kid. Through the room’s open door, I can hear the nurse yelling my mother out of her post-op bed and curtain and into a bathroom to change. I do not know if Mom makes it into the bathroom alone, but it seems unlikely that in her state could manage the task of threading her arm through a sleeve.

* * *

In 2009, my mother was diagnosed with what’s known as “triple negative” breast cancer. When first I heard the diagnosis, for a brief moment I thought, “This must be good news! Like, *negative* cancer equals *no* cancer, right?” Mom having three times the no-cancer seemed even better than having no cancer at all. I wondered if the doctors might have finally found the proof we’d all been expecting—that Mom really was as superhuman as she’s always seemed. It took no stretch of my imagination to believe that

scientists would be examining Mom's miraculous Triple-Non-Cancer in research labs for the next fifty years and as a result curing, maybe, *three times* the cancer than they'd previously thought was possible. What a relief that might have been.

To figure out a treatment plan, a physician must cut before she may cure. Biopsies are taken, tumors are removed, and once the malignant tissue has been thoroughly cornered, the doctor and her colleagues give him the grilling he more than deserves. *I've got three questions for you, you malicious sonofabitch* they whisper to themselves, squinting their viewing eye, adjusting the focus of the scope. *We hear you've been posing as some kind of hormone receptor protein? Got anything to say to that? Tell us what've you been feeding on! Is it estrogen? Progesterone? I want answers, damn it!*

A common misconception about breast cancer is that it is merely one "type" of cancer, like throat or lung or colon. [Body part] plus "cancer" equals, the equation seems to go. This might be obvious, but it bears mentioning that cancer is much more complicated than that.

Of the four subtypes of breast cancer, my mom's is not only the most rare and difficult to treat, it's also the result of a genetic defect mom has carried inside of her body since birth—a defect she inherited from her mother and her mother's mother and back who knows how far. The instructions for building breast cancer are in our family's DNA. Because of this, any female born on this side of the family tree—my aunts, cousins, sister, and any daughter born with the genetic makeup alive in any of us—is 80% more likely to develop breast cancer when compared to the average woman.

This element of my mother's prognosis, in particular, leveled the lot of us; lingered until the hurt of it blurred into the familiar, became unfelt although it stayed. As

her cancer has endured through the last seven years, long after surgeon's removed every trace of natural breast tissue from my mother's body, for my sister the thought of living with the fear of enduring what Mom has been through has simply become impractical. She's just not going to risk it, no thanks.

* * *

On the other side of post-op, a pot-bellied repairman wriggles beneath an ice machine that's on the fritz. The crack in my sister's not-completely-private curtain frames the repairman perfectly. He is the show I watch because I don't want to look at what's really happening. As the nurses pass, I watch his stubby legs twitch like a sleeping puppy's. I stare at his butt. Watch the repairman's pants wipe up dust from the floor as he rotates his hips one way and the other to reach whatever doodads make up the guts of an ice machine.

Alicia's still upset, but it seems like the meds might finally be kicking in. Her eyes have dried up, but she's still far from ready to go home, despite what the nurses may desire.

I leave to use the restroom. A perfect reason for escape.

The recovery ward is a space so open and garishly fluorescent that when I step outside my sister's assigned partition it's as though I've been disrobed. It's like one of those dreams of routine days at school or at work where all is well and mundanely normal until you look down and realize your dick is hanging out. Mortified, you try in vain to run the full scope of feasible directions, just *away*, only to discover that behind every corner you turn is another larger and increasingly recognizable crowd: all your ex-girlfriends; bosses; teachers; co-workers who didn't like you; those gym class dudes who said you

ran like a “retard;” and a entire mass of people you may or may not have ever met though damned if each and every one of them isn’t so disarmingly attractive that your body reverts to prepubescence, reeling in every wiry hair, deactivating countless glands, every ignited hormone. You are certain you see Rihanna. That was *definitely* Rihanna. Shit.

I bolt to the recovery room exit.

* * *

Before my sister broke it to me over lunch at the little café, Mom had told me over the phone a week or two before my trip home that Alicia was making plans to have a preventative mastectomy. She sighed when she said it.

“I know she’s always had back pain and that in some ways this might be the smart choice for her,” Mom said, “But I don’t think she truly realizes what she’s about to go through. What it feels like to wake up one day and be less of a woman.”

I didn’t need much convincing to believe Mom’s assertion to be true. Alicia has long had a tendency for making drastic life choices on a whim. Every boyfriend she had in high school and especially in the years beyond was eventually bound to be her husband. When she was a still a junior, one Mormon kid she dated even went so far as to ask my parent’s permission to take my sister’s hand. It wasn’t all his idea. After she graduated high school, she got engaged to a guy who had about as much personality as the oilrigs he spent weeks at a time living and working on. He bolted a few months before the ceremony and stuck my parents with the bill.

Recently, Alicia decided that she should move her family to Florida and for months pressured both sides of my nephew’s grandparents to pack up their lives and follow she and her husband, leaving behind everyone and everything they’ve ever known

simply to “get away” and “be closer to the beach.” My brother-in-law’s parents sold their house and moved into an RV within a matter of weeks, made themselves ready to ship out at a moment’s notice, but Mom flatly refused, told Alicia that she isn’t willing to work with just any oncologist when her very life is at risk.

“Dr. Ramani cares about me,” Mom argued, “She knows my case and treats me like a friend. I don’t want to search and search all around Jacksonville until I find another doctor who will treat me half as good as her. A doctor who will think of me as more than just a number.”

Despite Mom’s answer, Alicia moved into a rental and put their house up on the market. She applied for her Florida nursing license. The plan was to pull the moving van away sometime in June, but in March Mom’s organs started shutting down. Florida remains Alicia’s plan should things start to turn around. I can’t blame her for wanting to get out and make a new life, but I have to believe that she’s banking on a power move against our mother that’s bound to come up short. No doubt, it will break my mother’s heart to lose the constant time she spends with her grandson, but I know that she will not change her mind.

When I ask my sister about all of this, she rolls her eyes and huffs.

“Mom acts like Dr. Ramani is the only doctor in the world,” she says, “Like no one in Jacksonville could ever be as good.”

“I hear you,” I try to console her, “But you know that if your life was at stake you wouldn’t be willing to take that kind of risk.”

“It’s not like the doctors in Jacksonville have never heard of cancer,” she laughs and I feel my lips go tight.

Somewhere in the last few years Alicia seems to have caught a mild case of gallows humor. Recently, we went to an appointment with my mom to meet a new specialist from a research hospital who will now be overseeing her case. As Mom checked in and Alicia and I headed to the bathroom at the end of the hallway.

“You know Mom started making arrangements for her funeral,” she said, her eyebrows raising like they do when she makes fun of something, the same nervous giggle following that accompanied her telling me about “getting [her] boobs cut off” that afternoon at the café. I couldn’t even put together words.

“She started calling around and pricing things right after she found out about the new tumors,” she continued. My head fell. It may have looked like a nod. “She’s already got a will going, too.” Alicia laughs again—huh huh!—smiling, like, *how silly is she, right?* and I’m so caught off-guard by all of this, so completely unprepared to have the worst sentences ever uttered to my face be followed by a laugh that I hardly register her punch line, which comes just before my hand reaches for the bathroom door: “You get the poodle!”

If I really knew my sister, if I felt some level of understanding toward the person I’ve now gone to lunch with only twice in my life, I suppose I could assure myself that Alicia couldn’t possibly be so callous, could never be so very fucked up as to think that there was a microbe of humor in the sobering reality our Mom has confronted day-to-day for the better part of a decade now. But, then, I haven’t been home, on the frontline of all of this, for any time beyond the year that Mom was first diagnosed. Alicia hasn’t missed a moment. That alone should be enough to get me to cut her some slack.

But in spite of my most strong-willed attempts to frame my sister's response in a light that's more empathetic, I cannot simply shrug off the sound of hearing Alicia laugh at the thought of our mother's death. I can't help but draw the parallel that just like Alicia felt nothing beyond the relief of "decluttering" when she sold for a few dollars in a yard sale heirlooms of hers and my mother's childhoods that Mom had saved for years especially for Alicia and her children, that maybe Alicia doesn't realize the value of what she's losing until it's already gone.

* * *

The nurse has brought a can of soda for my mother who, sitting up with her eyes closed, fights to get the straw into her mouth. Mom's cell phone rings and her purse becomes a labyrinth that weighs a hundred pounds. Weeks pass before her phone is to her ear.

"Hhhullo?" she somehow mumbles, wheezes, and whispers.

I hear sound of my sister's voice echo back from Mom's ear, but I can't make out the words.

To whatever Alicia may or may not have said, Mom responds, "You like that camera?" Without realizing, Mom has reentered a conversation from the day prior, as if stepping back into a recurring dream. Her eyelids flicker but never find their strength. Her phone becomes a pillow and she doesn't get out another word.

* * *

After all of Alicia's mastectomy, her new breasts were installed: smaller in weight and shape, in the hope that this might relieve at least some of her chronic back pain. Within days of the procedure, it was apparent that Alicia's body was rejecting the

implants. Her physician cautioned that if the inflammation didn't halt soon, everything installed would have to come out, not to be replaced for some time.

Today, after my mom, sister, and I leave this blue-bordered partition, Alicia will return home from her surgery and her husband's first words will be, "Your chest is even flatter than mine now!"

My mom will struggle to keep her fist from striking her son-in-law in his face—she'll tell me this later—but all I could wonder, hearing his sharp, automatic exclamation was if maybe Mom's cancer has little to do with Alicia's conspicuous loss of tact. If maybe it is more than the constant specter of our mother's fight against death that's turned my sister towards the gallows.

* * *

My instructions were to take my mother home and let her nap for the afternoon.

"She's gonna be out of it for awhile," the nurse had said, somehow without shouting, which I'd started to believe was her natural tone of speech.

Once we were in the car, I headed in the direction of home, but Mom kept wheezing that she was starving, that all she wanted was a Diet Cherry Limeade. She made me upsize her onion ring. My mom was stoned off of her ass—she doesn't upsize anything. But even as I watched a normally finicky eater annihilate a double cheeseburger and every last onion ring, I somehow found it safe to trust that she was "just a little groggy."

But it might have been wise for me to put my foot down when she said shopping for Christmas was the next thing on our agenda.

* * *

Back from the bathroom and inside the post-op curtain, Mom is wiping away tears with a careful finger as not to smear her mascara. She and Alicia are cracking up. I turn to see if they, too, have noticed the dust-butted repairman, but somehow he's gone missing.

“So, you just hung up on me?” Mom asks, “What was I saying?”

Alicia laughs, her eyelids tightening in a wince.

“I have no idea! I couldn't understand any of it and then you just stopped talking!”

I smile, beyond happy to see this sudden change of tension in the room—a new point of conversation beyond my sister's pain.

“She tell you about the belt yet?” I ask her.

Mom is beside herself.

“I got up this morning and looked at my receipts from Christmas shopping,” she says to Alicia, struggling to get the words out through her laughing gas hysterics, “I somehow spent two-hundred something dollars on your Dad at the Harley store on a belt and a butt-ugly shirt.”

“You don't remember any of it?” Alicia asks.

“I tried to stop her,” I butt in.

Mom has her head in her hands.

“I don't remember anything until I called you from Kohl's after you got off work.”

“You don't?” I ask. This is news to me.

The previous afternoon, I had spent more than an hour and a half watching Mom comb over the same handful of hideous shirts at the Harley Davidson dealership, lifting

up for inspection things she wouldn't typically deem worthy of more than a passing glance—secretly-plaid short-sleeve bush shirts with flaming eightballs on the back and seventy dollar price tags, for example—and consider the color of the stitching, the cut (a universal “box”), the size of the Harley logo, which she said couldn't be too small or it wasn't worth the cost until she forgot that she said that and hung over her arm two logo-less shirts she could easily have bought for a quarter of the price and sewn a Harley logo onto without Dad recognizing the difference. In the midst of our rounds bouncing between the store's three racks of men's clothing, the sales assistants came back to us again and again either because they were worried we were up to something or because they forgot we were the same two hopeless causes. Mom would say things like, “I want to get him a dress shirt,” or “I think I'll get him a new coat,” then methodically work her way through everything but, trying to garner my opinion on every indistinguishable item she picked up—often the same item she had just moments before hung back on the rack and feigned to walk away from—, endeavoring to coax me into debates over the subtle differences between the flames and skulls and scantily clad women emblazoned on nearly every item in the store when she had told me upfront within the first few minutes of our arrival that Dad wouldn't wear anything with flames or skulls or scantily clad women printed on it.

My mother and sister shake as I tell them the story. Both of them say that it hurts. My jaw muscles ache from the size of my grin.

“I can't believe you don't remember any of that,” I say, “That was just the first place we went to! There were two or three other places after that!”

“Oh god,” Mom says again, doubling over, “Guess I’d better try to find those receipts!”

Alicia and I blow our lips in near unison—accidentally identical to our dad—and though we’re in a curtain drawn room surrounded by other people, other conversations, other families; by nurses who, if we don’t free up this bed quick, will soon turn from passive-aggressive to straight up rude, I’m not ready to take the keys from my mother and pull the car up to the curb, not ready for the three of us to break into our separated parts beyond the privacy of this space that is not private, this moment in which my mother, sister, and I refuse to cease from laughing despite that it causes us pain.