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# Why We Stay

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WHY WE STAY

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in  
English  
by

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## As Simple as an Unlocked Door: Contextualizing Place and Gender Identity in the Personal Essay

Because I was born to two teenage parents in a small West Virginia town, because neither of them could care for me, I was raised by my grandparents: two fundamentalist Christians who saw my existence as a scarlet letter attached to their good family name. In my family, the lines were blurry, as were my roles. Was I a sister to my mother's brothers? A niece? We grew up under the same roof, reported to the same authority figures, rode the same routes on the school bus. Were my grandparents my parents, then? They made the casseroles and sewed on the Brownie badges, after all.

When I was a little girl, I had two recurring dreams. One I recount in my essay "Why I Can't Get Over Jon Benet," but the other I have only told to friends as a joke. In the dream, my mother and grandmother are in each other's faces and their bodies are so close that I was sure their hair would tangle together as they fought. They are both yelling, but the words aren't clear and so I can't understand what the fight is actually about. Right before the climax of the altercation, right as their faces are turning red and their mouths are snarled and turned down, they finally part, both taking a step back from each other as though they are ready to give up and walk away. Right at that moment, my grandmother reaches over and plucks my mother's breasts off her chest through her shirt. The action is fluid, and I remember wondering how they could come off so easily that my grandmother didn't even have to pull at them.

Years later, when analyzing the dream, I wonder if, by picking off my mother's breast like flowers from the ground, my grandmother was taking away the source of her

motherhood. I think that by removing my mother's way to feed a baby, my grandmother was stripping her of her power as a woman, or maybe she was simply revoking a right that she thought my mother shouldn't have yet: the right to be a sexual, desired being. Maybe it was her blossoming womanhood that my grandmother was withholding. The only certainty I see is that, in some way, my grandmother was taking a role away from my mother.

While familial tensions aren't the only (or even most prevalent) subjects I take up in my writing, they have formed who I am to such a large extent that they can't be divorced from my work. It is undeniable that they are the origin. In my writing, I seem to be searching for a context, for a place where I fit into a larger narrative about life and society. Without the fundamental feeling that I was placed somewhere I wasn't meant to be, I might have ended up having a less ambivalent feeling about place. As it is, though, place figures into my writing in a way that's more than a backdrop; the setting is a supporting character that I can't seem to shake.

When I look at place, I don't mean the drugstore down the street or the lush, moss covered mountains that provided a backdrop for my upbringing. I don't even mean the boulder that rolled off the hill and crushed a small house while I was growing up. Place is not just a geographical description, but a reaction to stories that weigh heavy on the air. Dorothy Allison takes up the emotional, interactive element of place in her essay "Place" in a way that feels like it was written with my hometown, Ripley, WV, in mind: "place requires context. Is it responsive? Does it notice me . . . are there people on the street that flinch as I go by" (Allison 8). For me, Allison is writing of a secret I

have always known: that a town can hate you, know you, flinch at the sight of you, even more than you could imagine. What, after all, could cause people in a small, middle class town to flinch more than a fifteen year old mother in 1985?

The themes that I struggle with are always bound up in my physical location: it's not so unusual anymore for someone from a small town to be raised by grandparents, especially in Appalachia. It's even less uncommon to be a child from divorced parents, or from teen parents. Maybe it was the blend of roles that caused the confusion. Maybe it was the weekend visits with my mother that interrupted the normalcy my grandparents attempted to create, or the quiet understanding that someday she would regain custody of me that caused me to feel anxious within my family, caught in a liminal space between belonging and not. I can't say, for sure, why I so badly wanted to find a way to make sense of myself in my world, but I didn't. I wanted to make the connections between the roles that didn't quite fit because I knew that, even more because of their contrast, fitting my pieces together would make the whole just that much clearer.

Family honor isn't a concept most Americans seem to relate to anymore. Even using the expression sounds anachronistic and melodramatic, as though there should be a crest involved or duels. The problem with the idea of family honor is that today, even if you live in a small town, you likely don't have the experience of having been from the same area that three generations of your relatives all shared. As Dorothy Allison acknowledges in her exploration of place: "most Americans no longer have the history of growing up in a town where their parents grew up and their grandparents grew up and handed down stories about what came before" (Allison 7), but I can assure you that, if you did, you know what family honor means.

People in small towns know that if they mess up or commit a grave sin, people will be retelling their narrative in bars or over a smoke for the next twenty years. It's not malice in a small town, but simply reality. For me, hybridity has always been something I could understand. Mixing things together that are natural contradictions was the only way to make sense of a bigger picture. So innate is my need to place myself into a context by searching for my place with others that the first time I read Eula Biss's *Balloonists*, I felt déjà vu. While the content didn't necessarily strike a chord with me, the form seems like a natural way to express an idea. Linear narratives required a definitive path, a destination already visualized in your mind. The lyric form Biss utilizes, the curious, digressive wandering from place to place, mimics, for me, the natural transitions of the human mind.

In a small town, I was forced to go to church on Sundays. Not just at the morning service, either, but for an encore of the morning lesson at six o'clock p.m. To keep us on the right path, there was also a check in point on Wednesdays when we congregated for Sunday school and prayer. Imagine, then, my grandmother's dismay when the mother of the boy who asked *my* mother to Homecoming the year I was born told everyone that her son would never go to a dance with a whore like my mom. This story, as is the way in small towns, was one I heard repeated from family members over the years, but one that I could never understand my connection to. At some point, though, it clicked: the story — and other embarrassing ones that shamed my mother for my birth — were told to me as warnings, as efforts to end a generational cycle.



In what is, perhaps, one of the most quoted lines of essay ever to grace the page, Joan Didion writes: *we tell ourselves stories in order to live*. The statement is so often quoted for its simplicity and its conventional wisdom; storytelling comes as natural to human beings as breathing or eating. Still, the surrounding lines are rarely included when referencing Didion's essay "The White Album:" "the naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor is a victim of accidie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be 'interesting' to know which." This next line, this description of wild speculation and curiosity about things that aren't exactly our business, captures the spirit of storytelling that rings most true for me. We tell ourselves stories because they're a way to make sense of our lives (and the lives of those we can't otherwise relate to) even when our own lives don't make sense to us. We can figure out the root of anyone's behavior if we analyze it enough, which makes us all feel safe, for if we understand how things fit and why they behave the way they do, we never have to feel isolated.

The wild speculation toward other people's stories is something that I take up in my braided essay "Petition." While I do not believe that my speculations are actually so loose and free from evidence, I do believe the attempt of putting myself into the mind of someone else, particularly someone I don't know, risks a type of rubbernecking far more intimate than staring at a car crash victim by the side of the road. The essay caused me to hesitate, and, yes, to consider its ethical implications, but ultimately to embrace the connections that my life bore to that of a stranger and to the way, because we share a place, we are connected in a way that extended to the page.

I know that's why I tell stories. I tell stories to wrestle with things that I don't want to feel. I tell myself stories to make sense of behaviors that are shocking and scary to me. But mostly I tell stories because I want to place myself into stories alongside other people so that I can prove that we belong together. Like family trees, stories unfold generationally and, even as you watch the vines of each narrative unfold, it's impossible to see how much they weave together until you place them side by side in a narrative. Am I saying, then, that Teresa Baker is somehow connected to me and that this justifies my intrusion in her life through the essay? I would say, yes, in a way that can only be explored through a story. Because we exist together on the page, because our lives manage to unfold concurrently in a place that our people have known for many years, I would say that the story is ours: Teresa's and mine.

The question of comparison is a question I raise multiple times throughout my own work and, again, I believe the answer can only be attempted through lyric essay. In *the Balloonists*, Eula Biss meditates on connections in a journey that is very similar to my own. She looks at the relationship of her parents and, in a collage of images and world news, traces that relationship back to her own intimacies. There is a connection between the way she resists romantic relationships that parallels her mother's hesitations. Is Eula Biss exactly like her mother? Is that the message that is being relayed through *the Balloonists*? Of course not. No two people are ever the same. Still, as their respective romantic relationships crumble in a space where things that happened decades apart are suddenly occurring simultaneously, can we see how love and rela

tionships are cyclical and repetitive? Do we see how we learn to be the people we become through observation?

I take up the idea that my story belongs to generations most overtly in the essay “Between Mothers and Their Daughters,” a lyric essay that leads the reader — and the writer— on a search for truth. There are, I find, many versions of the truth and, even within one person’s mind and perspective, those truths shift over time. Despite their inconsistencies, the truths that belong to one generation feed the truths of the next so that story, and its meaning form a collective knowledge that evolves within the youngest in the cycle. Memory, we know, is fallible and biased, but it’s also constantly evolving.

The idea that memory is capable of playing tricks on the mind is examined further in Lauren Slater’s memoir “Lying,” a memoir that analyzes complex parent/child relationships, mental and physical health, and dysfunctional romantic relationships, all while attempting to challenge the boundaries between truth and the imagined. Still, what Slater creates is a textual type of evidence that it isn’t the fact that matters; it’s the perception. In her memoir, Slater revisits a memory of a time she accompanied her mother on a visit with a man with whom she knew her mother was having an affair. Slater then recounts being left alone in the car while her mother visited: “When I said ‘it’s been hours, Mom,’ she said ‘it’s been minutes, Lauren,’ and I got so confused—water, vapor, tested time—that right then I felt a craving in me, a craving for something safe and solid and absolutely absolute” (68-9). It is that craving—that shared longing for some palatable truth—that compels storytelling.

Still, if memory is so malleable, so easily manipulated by outside circumstances, how can we ever make the claim that its product is non-fiction? David Shields, in his

book *Reality Hunger*, would argue no, that “anything processed by memory is fiction”(57), and I only have to look back to the narrative my brain generated after my car accident to know that he’s right. Even when we know we can’t remember, we explore what *must* have happened so many times that we know it’s real, don’t we? Or even in my retelling of the day my mother gave me away on the front lawn — I admit I don’t accurately remember that. My mind was too young to hold on to memories of days that unfolded when I was two. But that doesn’t stop me from seeing it and seeing things that not only probably didn’t happen, but couldn’t have happened. My mother, as I explore in the essay, didn’t have dirty blonde, stick straight hair that day: by 1987, she was a 17 year old girl who went to rock concerts with her hair teased and dyed platinum. She was no longer a child in a majorette outfit, but nearly a woman. So why do I remember my mother as a person whom I never saw? Why does my memory, my biased generator of narrative, need my mother to be young and innocent in the front yard when she signs me away?

While I was working on this collection of essays, I once was talking about the essay “On Why I Can’t Get Over JonBenet” with a professor and I said to her, “You know how everyone has that one kidnapped child case that just really sticks out in her mind forever? JonBenet Ramsey is mine.” My professor, of course, looked at me and supposed that most people do *not* have a missing child they fixate on, nor a favorite murder case, nor anything similar. She told me that it was interesting and telling that I assumed that, because it was true for me, it was likely true for everyone.

In a way, I think that sums up who I am and how I write. I am a person who believes in the collective unconscious, who believes that while we are all different, we

have the same driving forces deep inside, that, to return to Shields: “I’m interested to know the secrets that connect human beings. At the very deepest level, all our secrets are the same” (27). I write to find my place in that cluster of secrets, even when it’s not obvious that there is a place for me. I, after all, was not a kidnapped child. I was not a beauty queen, or the child of parents who sold their food stamps, or even the child of drinkers. I grew up in a “good family,” as my grandma would say; the kind of family where we have plenty of secrets, but they would absolutely never become news.

At certain points in my life, that changed. In “Between Mothers and Their Daughters,” I recount a time when I, most certainly, could have made the news. My life was no longer one of challenging social norms, but one of courtrooms and domestic violence shelters. Again, place was alive and tense and tied up in everything I attempted. Because my work relies so heavily on certain aspects of the courthouse, the appearance of the Pressley Ridge School “campus,” and the streets of vinyl sided houses that wrap through my little city, I am reminded again of Allison’s essay “Place.” In one way or another, the biggest function of place in my body of work involves the evolution from being placed inside settings against my will literally, like in “Once a Pressley Ridge Kid,” or figuratively within the context of my abusive marriage to the exploration through places I have sought out.

Also, in “Asylum,” I continue my analysis of the relationship I have to others that seem similar to me. I continue to be fascinated by the parallels between my life and the lives of others, especially those that are somehow abandoned by the place they have called home. Like the feelings I imagine for Margaret Schilling and Teresa Baker, there have been times when I have felt let down by my contract with society: like Baker, I

have felt betrayed by the justice system and, like Schilling, I have felt like an outsider within walls that entrapped me. Still, I know these connections are only scratching the surface and that it is the need to puzzle out the way I fit into place and the way place has created compels my work in *Why We Stay*. In *Reality Hunger*, David Shields writes:

The world exists. Why re-create it? I want to think about it, try to understand it. What I am is a wisdom junkie, knowing all along that wisdom is, in many ways, junk. I want a literature built entirely out of contemplation and revelation. Who cares about anything else (140)?

In both "Petition" and "Why I Can't Forget JonBenet," I weed through other people's stories to create meaning for myself as part of a larger social context. To be in the world means to be part of it; this truth is evident in the way I can't separate my own parenting from the parents of little lost girls, as well as in the way I see myself in a mother who defends her daughter from an abusive partner. After all, I don't live in Teresa Baker's home on Cedar Street, but I am part of her community, both as a Huntingtonian, and as a woman. The world exists, as Shields reminds us, yet Allison would add that we need to ask ourselves why we attempt to re-create it. We re-create it because, while place has a context, place has a context that is different for us all. Because that context can so quickly change the way the world around us is constructed, the puzzle is different for each individual.

Returning to the work of Lauren Slater, in addition to her perception of memory as malleable, I also see a struggle with place that is familiar to me. Like my work,

Slater's investigates a place that is at once familiar and uneasy, a sense of the uncanny. She investigates places she sought out and places in which her presence was forced. In the essay "Three Spheres," Slater recounts returning to a psychiatric hospital in which she was once a patient. The sense of place is heightened, however, by the sense of context that she provides; Slater is returning not as a patient, this time, but as a doctor. She discusses in her essay how much the world changes, how much of a shift really occurs, when the context is different. She is expected to use the staff bathrooms instead of the patient bathrooms; doors that were once locked to her are suddenly open – both literally and figuratively. The piece culminates in her allowing a patient to open a door that is locked to patients. By giving the patient access to her key, Slater is creating a new context for both of them; "keys are symbols of freedom and power and finally separateness. For in a mental institution, only one side has the keys" (Slater 20). While the key is a way to literally navigate the space of the mental institution, it's also a symbol for the freedom to control your own life, and, therefore, the narrative you construct of that life material.

In this collection of essays, as I mentioned briefly earlier, I too write about a shift in time from being placed in locations against my will to placing myself in locations that I saw as desirable. There were times throughout the writing of this collection of essays that I wondered how much place really factored in to the project of the piece. In "Once a Pressley Ridge Kid," for example, I grapple with the idea that maybe the location doesn't matter. The topic was how women were treated in the world, not the way we were being treated in placement. There was nothing that was being added by explaining Pressley Ridge other than complicating and confusing the real issue.

Yet, somehow, when I started to write about Pressley Ridge, I struggled. As an undergraduate, I had begun the essays an early experiment with vignettes. As I looked over those vignettes for this collection, I knew instantly that they needed to be heavily revised and that some material needed to be cut. I had the idea that the project of the piece was about my loss of a voice and the way, while in Pressley Ridge, I became nothing more than one of Pressley Ridge's children. My identity was stripped by the mantra that you are always "a Pressley Ridge kid" and that everything you were before you became one is gone forever. The problem was when I sat down to write my new Pressley Ridge essay, it didn't work. It wasn't the story I wanted to tell.

No matter how much we fight it, character is created by place and place gains meaning from its characters. Without Pressley Ridge as the setting for "Once a Pressley Ridge Kid," much of the tension would have been lost. The essay analyzes the ways in which women are forced to shoulder blame for the actions of others and, in the context of my life, the way I was put in Pressley Ridge to take responsibility for the mistakes of other people, a former friend and my grandmother as much as to be punished for my own mistakes. In the story, without Pressley Ridge, there would have been no punishment to address and the context would have been lost. As Slater teaches the reader when she allows her patient to have access to the key in "Three Spheres," the place and the character are bound up in each other in a knot that is almost impossible to untie.



## Petition

This is a war story.

This is a story about a war being waged against approximately half of the United States that – despite the huge number of people being attacked – no one seems to notice.

Instead of camouflage and tanks, the battlefields are lined with SUVs and chain link. Instead of strong men with shaved heads proud to serve their country, we have people who become stuck in a battle that doesn't end.

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In 2008, Teresa Baker, a woman in my hometown, called the police when her daughter's boyfriend began beating her daughter in front of the couple's small children. After Baker called 911, she waited for over an hour while Jeffrey Sadler threatened her daughter, Alison Grieco. Because the mother and daughter lived in nearly matching white vinyl homes that sat side-by-side, she could hear the fight as it unfolded. As a spectator, she was aware that Sadler had continued his assault of Alison, but instead of losing momentum as time passed, his anger only escalated. He said he would "gut" Alison with the knife he was using to stab holes in the walls as he continued to beat her.<sup>1</sup> Baker called a second time, at which point the dispatcher informed her that the police were very busy and couldn't get there.

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<sup>1</sup>"Trial Date Set in Teresa Baker Case." Featured. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Nov. 2013.

The last call she made that day was to tell the police she had shot Sadler, at which point they were suddenly available to dispatch.

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My grandmother and I rode together in her van one afternoon. I sat, resting my head against the glass of the window as she drove, my eyes shut as the warm sunlight hit my face. She drove along and her freckled, thin hands both rested on the steering wheel at three and nine o'clock. We were moving parallel to a cemetery, one with massive expanses of green grass and rolling hills. To the left of us, by Gino's pizza shop, was the street where the woman had lived. The street where, before her family was destroyed, she had watched her grandchildren play. The road itself was cobbled brick and narrow, barely enough room for neighbors to have parking spaces. One story homes with vinyl siding were the norm, many with chain link fences encircling the yards like cages.

As we drove by that street on the week the event took place, I was asking my grandma for advice about my problems with my own husband, who was also violent. I chewed on a jagged piece of skin that stuck out from my forefinger as I watched her face. It never moved and I looked for the light, pock mark scars from when she had been burned as a child – the ones that you could only see when she was flustered.

*You have no idea, she said to me, how many marital problems can be fixed by spending a half hour every day on sexual activity.*

There were many reasons why I was floored by her statement. One was that she is not the type of person to ever advocate sexual activity, even within the context of mar

riage. She is, quite frankly, a prude: the type of woman who prohibits tampon use, refers to the vagina as a “front butt,” and told her daughter her face looked like a “possum’s butt” the first time she wore red lipstick.

More pressing, however, was the discomfort that came from my knowledge that she blamed me: to her, my husband would hit me less if I put out more.

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During the five years since Teresa Baker shot her daughter’s boyfriend, new information has become available to the public through social media, articles, and even websites focused on gossip. Jeffrey Sadler, the young man in question, had been violent with Alison Grieco (the daughter) in the past. Just months before the incident, for example, he had punched her in the face four times and threatened to “rob [her] blind”<sup>2</sup> after being questioned about money that was missing.

Although the police had been involved, something had kept them from acting. Alison called the police and had him arrested, but even after a bench warrant was executed, the police chose not to pursue Sadler. Grieco obtained a domestic violence petition (Cabell County’s version of a restraining order) but it was largely ignored.

I don’t have to try very hard to put myself in Baker’s state of mind. I can imagine the way time stretched out in front of her as she became less sure what to do, less sure about whether she should intercede more, less sure that anything was going to change. The way thoughts must have come so quickly they streamed together as she stood in

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<sup>2</sup>“Woman Charged in Fatal Shooting.” Featured. 06 Feb. 2008. Web. 08 May 2014.

her yard trying to hear something that would set her mind at ease. Every second was a reminder that she was alone.

*They haven't ever protected Alison before and they aren't going to this time,* she probably thought.

Standing on her front porch, I imagine she wrapped an arm around her own middle the way people do when they're nervous. In one hand, she held a bunny slipper that was hiding a gun, in the other she must have held her phone. Weight shifting from one side to the other, she moved as if driven by a mechanical force. She even bounced a little on her feet as she waited, her ears strained to see if she can still hear them fighting next door or if things are quiet. She didn't know which would be worse because the noise would mean her daughter was still alive, while quiet is always less definite. The phone became almost human and, as she stared down at it, she wondered why no one will come, *why no one cared.*

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In the bathroom of the courthouse, I put my coffee between my knees as I used the restroom and I looked at the graffiti that lined the inside of the stall. More defined than the instinct that adults shouldn't vandalize bathrooms was my instinct that they were brazen. Right in a courthouse full of police, judges, and criminals with tempers, they were willing to break the law over something as small and irrelevant as scribbling proclamations of love.

I walked down the basement hall with its dim lighting. People lined the halls, a row of bodies sprawled out across a hard, wooden bench. Couples leaned on each other

er's shoulders, clasped white knuckled fingers, cried. I didn't want to sit with them, so I leaned against the dingy wall and breathed in the heavy scent of stale smoke and old coffee.

When it was my turn, I followed an officer back to have my Domestic Violence Petition signed. The woman whose signature I needed was short and thin, and wore large framed glasses that tucked neatly behind her ear. Her brown hair was cut blunt across the tips of those same ears and I remembered thinking she reminded me of my grandma. She wouldn't make eye contact with me as she spoke to me, asking questions about where I lived, when I was born. As she signed the paper I handed her, her eyes left the clipboard and noticed my Coach purse. She complimented it while her eyes finally met my gaze.

My Coach bag had quarter sized, black and pink stains on the liner where I had let pens leak their ink into the fabric. I usually carried it inside out despite those stains, because the liner was hot pink and white and turquoise striped and made of a satiny material, while the outside, to me, looked like something an old lady would carry. It was navy and tan and made of leather. As she sized up my bag with her narrow eyes, I wondered what she would think if she knew that I hated my bag; that my gift had felt like another reminder that my husband either didn't like who I was or wanted me to be someone else.

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In the comments section of the article written on Baker's case, a woman notes that Jeffrey Sadler was the grandson of a local magistrate and that, if he weren't, there would be no reason to pursue the case.

In an article from the local newspaper, the chief of police went on record as saying that Teresa Baker should have told the 911 dispatcher that she had a gun. It was his claim that, even though at that point she wasn't part of the altercation, her ownership of a weapon would have made the call a priority in a way that it wasn't: Teresa Baker's possession of a firearm meant more than a man stabbing holes in his walls in front of his children, or a woman being beaten.

In the *Herald Dispatch*, another local newspaper, Alison Grieco is referred to as "the victim's girlfriend," while Sadler is considered the victim. The prosecutor, Sherry Eling, went on record with her thoughts: "The message needs to be: Don't take things into your own hands."<sup>3</sup>

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My ex-husband was reading the newspaper while my family and I sat on the back deck talking. It was after Sunday lunch and we were all pot-roast-fat and bogged down by a carbohydrate haze. Stretched out on black iron patio furniture and looking over my grandma's koi pond, we were all content to stay put. Our daughter was a little over a year old and her gait was still a coerced negotiation with the ground beneath her, so when she headed towards the stairs, I called to my now ex to grab her. He ignored me,

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<sup>3</sup>"Homicide Hearing Focuses on Police Response." Featured. N.p., 14 Feb. 2008. Web. 06 Nov. 2013

so I leaned over and gave him a small pinch on the side to get his attention. He grabbed her and I got up to go inside.

He hit me in the back and I remember less about the pain than I do the collection of gasps from my grandparents, great grandma, and great aunt. For one split second, it sounded like the wind was echoing, but it was the collective inhalation that was their shared reaction. My aunt asked him why he hit me as though she expected a logical answer and my nanny went white faced as if someone had wiped away all her too-thick rouge. Instead of apologizing to my relatives for making a scene, he fled and I was urged by my step-grandpa to call the police.

It was the first time I had ever called them after being hit by him and I was scared as I dialed 911. I didn't know what would happen to him. After I talked to the dispatcher, I sat alone in my grandmother's plush, striped living room chair and used my fingers to make mazes in the crushed velvet. I had always loved the way the fabric would darken as I created my own paths, as if the fibers could remember my touch long after I was gone. Even with the shadowed lines that remained, if you simply rubbed the fabric back in the other direction, it was like there was never a mark.

I sat like that for over an hour before I realized they weren't coming. I didn't call a second time; I gathered up my daughter and went home.

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A little more than five years ago, Teresa Baker killed her daughter's boyfriend. In 2010, a judge denied the prosecutor's attempt to indict her for murder, but the grand jury failed to support that ruling. Last month, November of 2013, her case was delayed yet

again due to unavailable transcripts from a previous hearing. For Teresa, the waiting game should feel very familiar except this time, as she waits to be put on trial for murder, it's her own life that hangs in a purgatory state instead of the life of her daughter.

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Once you leave an abusive relationship, people almost always ask you why you stayed. I don't know exactly what to tell them because I'm simply not the same person anymore. I was a prisoner then, and now I'm not. I tell them different things. I say that I stayed out of a desire to protect my daughter, out of fear of how I would live without his income, and sometimes, when I'm feeling especially honest, I tell them I didn't like feeling alone. What I never tell them is that, in part, I stayed because of a memory.

Long before I was his wife, back when I still lived with my grandparents, I made dinner one night to impress him. Nothing I liked: salmon patties, macaroni and cheese, kale. I had stood in front of a stove, watched the oil go from cold and thick in the pan to a sheen of grease, so thin you could see the heat. After placing the food onto plates, spooning out each portion, laying out the napkins, I waited. And waited. He didn't come.

I called him and he didn't answer, so I went outside and stood barefoot on the patch of cement where cars should park. I called again, eyes fixed to the brick path alley ways, the broken glass, the puddles.

My grandmother came outside and asked me what I was doing. She crossed her arms and leaned next to me. I told her I was waiting for Matt because he hadn't shown up, that I was calling him but he wouldn't answer.



She leaned against her white car and said to me *I would just let it go. Don't push too hard; you'll never do any better than that one.*

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In 2008, in Charleston, West Virginia, a woman named Na'lisha Gravley was kidnapped off the street by her ex-boyfriend, Desmond Clark. Clark, a convicted felon, grabbed Gravely and forced her into his car. Because she had previously been in a relationship with her kidnapper – a relationship she had left because he was violent – she knew what kind of danger she was in. When he stopped at a traffic light, she bolted from the car, running into a Taco Bell.

Seeing the faces of the employees and the well-lit store, she probably felt like she had been saved as she entered the building. There were, after all, witnesses. There were other customers, eating their tacos and Mexican Pizzas while sitting at hard plastic booths. There was little time for relief, however, as Gravely realized Clark had followed her into the store. She called 911 from the Taco Bell phone then ran, phone in hand, into a storage closet. She died in that closet after being shot repeatedly by the father of her child, a man she had loved.

She had a protective order against him at the time.

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On Facebook, after sharing an article about domestic violence, I got the following comment from the mother of a girl who had grown up with my daughter: “some females are so mental washed they don't report however there are a lot of women that call the

police and ask for help and go right back to the guy and apologizes for getting him in trouble. Its all disturbing either way. Its hard to understand some ppls behaviors.”

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They ask us: why do you stay? I think the question that we should counter with is “what would happen if we go?”

In January of 2008, I had my husband arrested for assaulting me in our kitchen, as well as breaking the window of our front door. The glass fell on our daughter and, although she wasn't hurt, I went through with pressing charges because she could have been. Never before had the violence come so close to affecting her and I wanted to insure that it never came that close again.

In May of 2008, my husband was banished from the state of West Virginia. It was, in that moment, easy to romanticize the situation. We were kept apart by people who thought they knew how to save me. It was downright Shakespearean.

Of course it wasn't that dramatic. The reality was that, to avoid being sent to jail for domestic battery, Matt had agreed to a pre-trial diversion (a tactic used to avoid sentencing by proving a change in lifestyle while awaiting trial) that required him to give up contact with me and move back home to his parents in Virginia. *If you leave her behind, his lawyer said, it will show that you're serious about changing the behavior.*

I wanted to ask how. I didn't hit anyone, why was I the source? How would agreeing to give me up help change his behavior?

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If Teresa Baker didn't live next to her daughter the night of the fight, if Alison had been left alone to handle the confrontation with her boyfriend, maybe she would have had enough. Looking at her children's tiny faces, maybe she would have thought I *can't do this anymore*. Her coat would be the only thing she grabbed as she slithered past Jeffrey, little fingers grasping at hers. A slam of the door as she walked out.

Then what?

Would Alison have made it to her car before Jeffrey ran after her? Would he have grabbed the kids and locked her out to teach her a lesson? If they got away, would he have just let her go? Maybe shut the door behind him, released a sigh, and just moved on?

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*At least the visitation is supervised*, people said when we were first divorced. Yes, I said. *Supervised by his parents*.

I think people envision that supervised visitation means that the two meet under the care of a neutral third party who has no interest other than the safety of our daughter. Instead, he is watched by his mother and father while he is with her and, often, they don't supervise at all.

I went to my great grandmother's house one morning for breakfast and coffee and he was with her there. *Where are your parents?* I asked him. He muttered that they were back at the apartment complex. It wasn't the first time he had been unsupervised with her. During one visit I had seen them in his car driving down route 60. I called my

lawyer the following Monday and asked what to do. He told me that there was nothing I could do; even if I took it to court it would be he said/she said and the judge would do nothing. *Well, I took a picture, I argued. I have proof.*

*You'll have to hire a private investigator, he told me. Unless a PI takes the pictures, they can't be used as evidence.*

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In 2007, a few days before her twelfth wedding anniversary, Brenda Robinson received a surprise visit from her husband. He did not come with flowers or jewelry, he came with a gun. The couple had recently separated and her husband, Eric, was bringing their three children home from a scheduled visitation.

She had a warrant issued against him for violating a protective order, perhaps the reason he was so upset. Brenda hid in the bathroom as her husband made demands. Demands for reconciliation. Demands for her to come out and face him. When he finally stopped, she probably sighed.

*Thank God. Maybe he will just go.*

Instead he shot himself in the head. As he lay bleeding she had only one thought: *where are my boys?*

Before Eric Robinson arrived at the home that day, he had shot their three young sons in the head. They died in the hospital as their mother waited.

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In the hallway outside the courtroom, I sat on a long hard bench waiting with a latte in my hands. I didn't know what I hoped would happen in the courtroom. I knew what to say I hoped would happen; I knew to say that I shouldn't feel guilty for having

him arrested. But still, his mother watched me sit on the bench that reminded me of the pew of my old church and I felt like God was watching me by the way her eyes ripped into me. She didn't say a word to me, but I could tell she wanted to — behind her glasses her eyes never shifted focus away from me.

I went to use the bathroom, giving my grandmother my drink. As I walked down the hall I was careful to look straight ahead. I didn't want a confrontation. She let me pass without comment, but on the way back she stopped me.

*Do you think this is right, what's happening to Matt?* She asked.

My head fell. She was his mother. There was nothing to say.

*You make me really mad, Brittany. Really mad. You are so manipulative and I just don't know when you are going to take some responsibility in all this.*

I paused. I studied her there in the moment, with her hair falling into her eyes in time with rhythm of her anger. Her head shook as she said "really mad" both times. I thought of her the last time Matt and I had split up, after he had punched me in the head in front of a house full of people. That day — the first time we had looked in each other's faces since I had kicked him out of the house — she had stood up the same way, so red that I thought she might pass out as she yelled and shook and blamed. That time it was my fault because, in her mind, I had been on a date when her son came home. In reality, there had been five of us sitting together in my living room, drinking cheap red wine that came from a box, and talking about times long gone.

*Responsibility?* I thought. *He learned this bullying from you after all. He learned he has*

*no consequences from you. Where's your sense of responsibility?*

I didn't say that, though, and I'm glad. If I had said that, I would have been just as guilty because as I stood there embarrassed in the courthouse while she screamed at me, I was blaming her instead of him.

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In the same courthouse, on the same wooden pews, Teresa Baker will soon sit as she waits to be tried for the murder of a local magistrate's grandson.

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Matt brings our daughter home to me after a visitation and her hair falls tight to her head. Although the temperature is below freezing, her hair is wet. I look at him in his wool coat and heavy sweater and think: how can he not realize she gets cold too?

My jaw tightens when I talk to him. I don't know how to be in any state with him other than a state of combat. It's hard to settle into a life that isn't divided into two battle zones. I have to remember, sometimes, how to be someone other than a battered wife to the family members that saw me that way. I have to let go of grudges. Not look for enemies.

Still, you hear stories of soldiers coming home from war and, even though they know they're finally safe, the war zone comes home with them. They startle at loud noises and they have dreams that cause them to wake up in a sweat. They drive down the brightly lit streets with other cars beside them, but the war zone is still there. For a woman who has left, there are times in your new relationship when your partner might

raise his voice in anger and you find, even though there has never been a reason, your instinct is to flinch.

## Barrier

### I.

On the shore, my youngest daughter digs in the sand. Her white, satin skin resembles the smooth surface of the sea shell she uses as a shovel, and the sand that curls up her legs is a shadow of the hair that will one day grow. She is squat and hunched to the point of being fetal now, though, and I can't fathom a day when she will be anything more than my baby. Water fills the hole she has created, foam caressing each gap in the sand. She has made a pool to stand in, to rinse her fingers in, to dip her toes in. From a short distance, I look over the edge of my book periodically to ensure that she is still okay.

A boy walks up to her. They are close in age, but he is taller, and his thick black hair falls into his eyes in wet strips. He bends beside her and begins to dig in the sand next to her with a small plastic shovel.

He turns his head to look at her and says something in a language I don't recognize. She can't understand him, so she smiles and, even though she has nothing to say, they fall back into the rhythm of their play. They dig in tandem as the waves curl up against their limbs.

### II.

After the beach, we ride home in an SUV my grandmother has rented for the drive. She has asked me about school and my classes and I'm telling her about a profes



sor that teaches Queer Theory. She turns her head suddenly when I say the word “queer,” but I explain that I am using the actual term for the class.

I tell her that my husband and I have argued about this professor. Miah believes that my professor must be gay and his wife just a beard because a straight man wouldn't be interested in the study of gay people. I didn't waste any time explaining that queer meant more than gay, but instead tried to argue that I care about the civil rights movement even though I'm not black, and many men identify as feminists even though they are not female.

“Aren't I right?” I ask my grandmother as she grips the steering wheel. “Don't you think it's ridiculous to say only a gay man would teach a class on queer theory?”

I wait for her to answer me, or to look away from the road, or to turn on the radio. I wait for her to do something. Only her eyes move and I watch them scan the road in front of us. They settle on a motorcycle one car ahead in the opposite lane.

“I think . . .” she trails off. I wait again, hoping this won't be one of those times when she starts a sentence only to permanently abandon it. “I think that man has a teddy bear riding on the back of his motorcycle.”

Wearing a helmet, the bear sits on the back, behind the driver. He is facing out and I can see his threaded black nose. My girls look up and we share a laugh over the tough biker who hauls his teddy on his Harley. I decide to drop the issue about my professor.

## III.

When we get back to her condo, I wonder about why we can't speak to each other. We exist, in a way, with the same rhythmic flow as the boy that Bianca shoveled with at the beach. As long as no words pass between us, there is no obstacle to overcome. In silence, we share the same space with a sort of paralleled peace. Together we chop vegetables for the salad at dinner, snap photographs of the children as they pose in their bathing suits, hold out clothes in the stores in the outlet malls. But after the children are asleep, despite the presence of the other's physical body, we are alone.

On the way home, I make notes about my trip in a journal that I carry in my purse.

My grandma looks over at me as I scribble, her eyes glancing at the pages for mere seconds before flitting back up to the road. She continues the pattern for a couple minutes before she tilts her head and shifts in her seat.

"Are you writing about me in there? Writing down all the stupid things I say?"

I shut my notebook and look at her face. Her mouth is tipped downwards in the corner and even though she looks very young for her age, she also looks very tired.

"No," I said. "You haven't said anything particularly stupid."

She isn't really worried that I am writing about her; she knows she is mentioned in my work sometimes, but she knows that she can see the things I finish. She feels it, too, I realize: the distance between us. She is trying, just like I am, to find a way to talk,

to find a way to translate the words that don't come across. I want to talk to her. I think about opening up and telling her about the way I had been moved by Bianca on the beach with the child I didn't know. How the vision of their tiny bodies covered in sand on the shore, swallowed by the waves that licked their legs, had stayed with me for some reason I couldn't put my finger on. Instead, I simply say again, "No, I'm not writing about you."

I lean my head against the window of the car door and watch, in silence, as we make our way down the interstate towards home.

## Once a Pressley Ridge Kid

Pressley Ridge Schools, Grant Gardens Campus, is located in Ona, West Virginia, just outside of Huntington. As of 2002, the first thing you saw when you pulled up was a building out front that housed the cafeteria and had a basketball court right beside it, a little wooded area on its border. Through that wooded area and up a hill are two houses, both two stories tall. It is easy, when you first arrive, to forget that you are not entering a summer camp facility. The recreation is available, but it is not the focus. One building houses the girls, one houses the boys. The two floors separate the groups by severity of their delinquency. Level twos on the top, level threes on the bottom. Level two is reserved for adolescents who have committed what are considered status offenses, meaning they've done things that wouldn't be illegal if they weren't minors. Some examples are truancy, running away, and staying out too late at night. Level two is for people who aren't actual criminals, that's reserved for level three. Level two is where I belonged, given that I was in the system for status offenses.

Instead, for five and a half months during my senior year of high school, right up until a month before my fucking eighteenth birthday (and, yes, I do still have some bitterness about it), I lived on the bottom floor of the girl's building. I had been drug tested once a month for six months before I was put away, but never failed. The social worker, an older woman with short brown hair almost in a buzz cut, loaned me Stephen King books to pass my time and always snuck me a cigarette when she took me to court. She agreed it was an inappropriate placement for me, suggesting a different level two facility upstate where I could still attend public school and would be allowed to have a job.

That social worker was dismissed and another one hired: a tan, blond woman whose hands looked like gloves because she forgot to rub her fake tanner on them. There was literally a line between her orange arms and her snow white hands. She put me in level three, got promoted, and I never saw her again. Not saying anything in particular here, but I have to add my two cents, which is that my city worked like a small town, my grandma's husband was on city council, and it amazed me that despite having no evidence of my alleged delinquency, I was shoved into a level three facility. Just nine other girls and then me. Them, a handful of drug dealers, a girl who had stolen a car, one who had set another girl's hair on fire. Then me, the hippie chick who smoked some pot and skipped some class.

It felt intimidating, walking into a room full of adolescent estrogen. There were certain things I just instinctively knew about what I was walking into. I knew that, regardless of the reasons for their incarceration, they were all familiar with each other and unfamiliar with me. That automatically bonded them; they were the herd and I was an other, moving in on any territory they had claimed. Any favoritism that existed with staff (and I knew it existed, it always exists) was threatened by my presence. I was an interloper and, despite it being school hours, despite the breaking of rules, they all turned in their seats to look at me as I walked into the director's office, their whispers hanging heavy on the stale air.

In the office, I learned the basics. I had to wear Bob Barker thonged flip flops at all times when inside the building, which I later learned were to slow us down if we decided to try to run. Our Bobs, we affectionately called them. There was no set amount of time that I should expect to be a guest there (for lack of a better word); I would be re

leased when I had morphed into their version of an acceptable human being. I would have a roommate. I would speak on the telephone only to people who were on my approved list, so only approved family members. Only for ten minutes a night. This was not summer camp, or a psych ward, this was punitive, they reminded me. *You are being punished.*

For me, the punishment was something I couldn't let go of even if I had wanted to. The reminder that I was being disciplined was drilled in to my head by my grandmother, who reminded me through her tears that she was sending me away to try to save my life. While we saw the situation very differently — I was not likely to pass away for smoking pot on the weekends, for example — I knew what her subtext was. Less than three weeks before I was sent to Pressley Ridge Schools, I was raped after I passed out from drinking a beer on my new medication. While I tried to argue that I had only had one and that I just didn't know how I was going to react, my grandma made it very clear that she blamed me and that sending me elsewhere was the only way she could deal with the embarrassment of the situation. So I tried to adjust, tried to make friends with the other girls, but I kept remembering the message: you are being punished.

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There were certain mottos at Pressley Ridge, mantras that you had to adopt as your own even if they didn't quite fit. The one that was most often part of our day was the saying: "once a Pressley Ridge kid, always a Pressley Ridge Kid." I didn't know it at the time, but I later learned that the mantra was actually part of the Pressley Ridge

guidelines. Still, there were other ones that seemed more relevant, more a part of how our lives actually functioned, even if they were slightly less official. One guideline that we found thrust upon us was a constant reminder to wear shame like a purse, strapped across your chest. If you looked at a member of the opposite sex during dinner time, you were huddled (like in sports, a huddle was a group conversation had in a circle while standing; unlike in sports, for us they were called when a rule was broken, so that we could all try to convince the offender to behave), even if the glance was coincidental more than lustful.

What always got me about the shaming was that it was largely ineffective. Making the boys forbidden didn't stop them from looking; it only made them sneaky and desperate. One girl, a thirteen year old with thick eyelashes, was so enamored with one of the boys that she cut her arm with a fork and snuck him notes stained by her blood.

I think that's what got to me; there was a possibility, I suppose, that the boys were scolded the same way for being desirous, but we never saw it. They were never huddled for their longing glances in front of us while we laughed. The fact that they were allowed to laugh at us at all showed how little it mattered if they were aware of us. In Pressley Ridge, we were reminded that boys have desires that are healthy, and girls pay for their lust with their blood.

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A girl that I shared a room with — a wiry, small girl, who jutted her hip out and pouted when she was mad — told us all that her father had raped her repeatedly, eventually resulting in a pregnancy he beat her to end. We all believed her, consoled her,

and maybe even liked her more, as though her life circumstances excused the fact that she left hair and goo in the drain of the bathtub and made huddles go on for a half hour due to her insistence to make “non-verbals” (she rolled her eyes a lot). One day he came to visit and I was even more sure that he was guilty. Although you can’t see that someone is a predator just by looking at them, there was something too hungry about the way his eyes lingered on the adolescent girls in the room, too mean behind his stare. He was guilty in my mind and I fixed my eyes on him, glaring unrelentingly. It was all I could really do; I was unwilling to risk being huddled up for an hour, shifting the whole timeline of the day for yelling at him, but I couldn’t just sit back and do nothing, either. My will wasn’t that broken.

I didn’t expect him to notice and, if he did I didn’t think he would dare say anything, imaging that shame lay on his moist, meaty lips like a thick solution, pasting his mouth shut. He looked at me, making direct eye contact. *What’s your problem little girl?* The staff herded us away, saying we needed to give Cassie some privacy, a little room to bond with her family. The thing that struck me was her mother, so much like Cassie with her scrappy thin build and loosely hanging, string like hair. Silent and unsmiling, hanging back from the father, she was all the proof I needed that the father was a monster.

One night we all sat around the table, hunched over our papers, some of us chewing on the ends of pens. Cassie was absent, but I didn’t think much about it until I was called into one of the offices that were usually inaccessible to us delinquents unless we were involved in conferences. Cassie sat there, looking up at me, her face flushed with wet streaks and raw skin.



“What’s up?” I asked, wondering if this was like the time she’d lied and said I had snuck and had sex on a home visit, when if I had she would be the last to know.

“I wanted to tell you,” she said, pausing as her eyes twitched around. “I wanted to tell you that my father never really raped me. I lied. I wanted to tell you alone because of the way you were so worried about me.”

I looked up at Crystal, the staff member that was in the room with us, her round face mirroring the disgust I felt. “Is she fucking serious?”

Crystal shook her head at me, a symbol that was supposed to stand for negation but was really just all she could muster. She had let the language thing slide and I was grateful, but I had to get away. “Can I finish my homework?” I asked. Crystal nodded and I returned to the yellow oak table, shifting in my chair enough that the other girls got annoyed.

Part of me resisted, believing that Cassie was lying now, not then. Her frail mother, her weak, trailing behind mother, was my evidence. Plus, even if she did everything right and they let her out, she wouldn’t be released back to the incubator/sperm donating duo (I refused to think of them as parents, especially the mother) if there was the possibility of abuse. Until they found her a foster home to go to, she would be kept, locked in this little hallway of five bedrooms that made up our world. To me, that was more than enough to persuade a lie to spring from out of the lips of a troubled kid.

The part of me that believed her, the bigger, blood boiling, consuming part, felt betrayal. Didn’t she know what this did to other women, women who really were raped? Wrong as it is, in this society when a woman lies about rape they become anecdotal ev

idence, proof that women are liars who are Hell bent on destroying the life of some innocent man. *Poor, maligned men*, they chant, an elevated cry like the songs of seraphim. Something inside me wanted to grab her just then, hold her by the shoulders and stare her in the eye and tell her there is such a thing as being loyal, that as women, we owe each other that much.

But that would have been too personable, admitting too much. I didn't talk to the other girls about what had happened to me before I arrived at Pressley Ridge and, unlike my visions of what lockup should be like for minors, there was never a time where we discussed how we had ended up together. We almost never discussed anything from back home except the music we missed, the television programs we wished we could be watching. We lived together, but we were not friends. So even though my anger at Cassie was personal, I couldn't tell her that, in my mind, every time a girl lied about rape, another policeman would feel justified telling a young girl that, because she had been drinking, he wouldn't waste his time questioning the culprit because he would distrust all women just that much more.

Because we were merely roommates I couldn't tell Cassie that her lie had transported me to a place that I had been almost able to leave behind; that it made me remember what it was like to sit on thin paper while my clothes were put into a bag and, even though I would never want to wear that outfit again, I hated the officer for demanding to take my belongings for evidence even as he told me that he would not be following up with the case.

I think even at seventeen I knew that was too much pressure to put on one little girl who, rape victim or not, didn't come from a place of support. Cassie had been alone in her pain, no matter how much I had tried to rally behind her. I was no one to offer support for her and, in reality, it was my own pain I was trying to comfort when I had come to her defense. Even after she admitted the truth, she had reasons to be wounded. Because even if she had been lying the whole time, didn't she still have a mother that stood by her father, not her, through the allegations? And, even when we lie, aren't we hurt when the one we love don't believe?

For a long time, I hated my grandmother for sending me away from home, hated her for putting all the guilt on me for something I felt I couldn't help. Something that happened to me, outside of my control. Then I realized I had done the same. Hadn't I judged Cassie's mother for allowing her daughter to be raped, for standing next to the man who did it? Hadn't I been just as quick to want to punish her? I tell myself that it's different because Cassie's mom was complicit in what happened to her, but if nothing happened to Cassie could her mom really be blamed for her support of her husband? Isn't the woman always the one who cleans up the messes?

## Between Mothers and Their Daughters

I remember the car, our silver Chrysler with the dents in the front. Matt had been so mad, shaking and red-faced as he clung to the steering wheel. His eyes never left the road as he screamed that he hated me, that he wished I would die and then that the brakes were out and I should jump out of the car before we picked up speed. I opened the door. I watched the asphalt blur by so fast that it looked like liquid, a silver river running beneath me.

I can only imagine what happened next. The way I flew out over the landscaped yards that lined the hills above Huntington. The way I must have turned somersaults in the air, diving and pushing through as whooshes of wind sprayed my face. Then the impact, the thud as I made contact, gravel popping away from me like shrapnel as I hit the surface. The tear of my skin. I know that at some point, my eyebrow was torn open by the black asphalt, filling it up with little pebbles as I skidded across. I know this not because I remember it, but because I remember the way it felt later when they irrigated my brow. When I shut my eyes, I can see the way it must have occurred, the way sometimes you just know things.

I was sitting on my daughter's bed, brushing her hair as she watched *My Little Pony*. Triangular heads and neon bodies made the horses look different than I remembered them; when I was a kid, they looked like normal horses but had colorful tails. My

eyes narrowed as I turned my attention back to her hair, where I had discovered a strange sticky place, something that matted together her fine, ashy locks.

“Why did you have that plastic over your eyebrow?” she asked me, interrupting my grooming process.

“What are you talking about?” I tried to recall an instance where I might have dressed as a pirate.

Her hand flew up to her own face, short, stubby fingers exploring her eyebrow. “You know, when you’re eye got hurt? When Daddy pushed you out of the car?”

I hadn’t said that to her, that he pushed me. I doubted anyone else had, either. It had been four years since my expulsion from the car. I knew by the way “when Daddy pushed you out of the car” was a question, not a statement— that it wasn’t my eyebrow she was really asking about. My hands began smoothing out the white sheets I had bought her for her birthday, stretching tight the pink and purple stars that decorated them as I tried to think of what to say. I wondered if my own mother had felt this way when I had done the same as a child: when I had asked questions I really didn’t want to know the answers to—questions that tore at the stitching of the real question.

“Are you saying that Matt pushed you out of the car?” his mother asked me, her eyes small in the way that made them appear black. She leaned on her elbows to move towards me across the table. Having breakfast with the two of them meant that I was sipping water trying not to throw up while they gorged on fried eggs and home fries. The

day before my body had been skinned. The whole left side of my body looked like my knees when I was little and used to fall out of trees. Zoe had moaned when she saw my eyebrow, or rather the gash that was dug into it, her small frame huddled against the car door to get away from me. As if I were someone else, not the mother who spent every night curled up asleep beside her. Why was it so hard for my mother-in-law to believe what I was saying to them as I watched them dig at their eggs with the tinny silverware?

“What I’m saying,” I said, “Is that I don’t remember.”

As I sat with Ed and Mary in Bob Evans, being questioned about what had happened the day before, I stared at Mary’s double chin and the way she seemed to bite at her fork when she put the greasy egg up to her mouth. I tried to piece together fragments, but got distracted by the wobble of egg and can only remember moments. The police had questioned me the day before in the emergency room, made it clear that they believed he pushed me, in the white room with the gray equipment, the monitors beeping to alert everyone that I was still alive, I wondered if I was really there as I touched the area right below my eyebrow, wanting to touch the wound but knowing my fingers weren’t clean. There was something in the way the brakes suddenly started working again as soon as I took flight, the way witnesses said he’d been pumping them the whole time. At the top of the hill, he had no problem turning around to come back. Despite their protests, to the cops I said I jumped.

“I don’t understand how it gave you a scar,” Zoe said with a scoff as I finished her hair. “The car is only a couple inches off the ground.”

I stood up and crossed the room, opening her white dresser to pull out pajamas for her to wear. Princess ones. “Well . . . it was moving.”

“Right,” she said, in a way that trailed off at the end, as if she were asking “And?”

Why does movement cause more damage? It makes sense to me, but I don't really know the science behind it: it's just that the faster you're going the more friction there is when you hit the ground. There's something I can't articulate; it's not like I just fell out of a parked car. Maybe if I wrote it down I could say what I meant, but I couldn't just stop to write down my life story for my eight year old right before I tucked her in to go to sleep.

Finger itching from absence, I picked up a black, fine point Sharpie that I see lying on the dresser, the scratched up, wooden piece that I clutter with every piece of junk mail I have no home for that catches the receipts and change when I empty my pockets each night. As I took the marker, I collapsed into the floor, landing in a crossed sort of way, my body naturally curling up into itself as if to block everything else. The carpet caused my skin to crawl as I stared at the foot of white wall between my door-frame and my dresser. Frozen for a moment, pen in the air but not making contact, I started after a pause of hesitation. I wrote in big scrawling cursive, loops of ink creating a mural against the blank canvas of the walls that shut me in. Drivel spills out mostly, sentences that sound like what they are: the word vomit of a broken woman who has no idea what to do except the only thing she knows how to do. I cursed him, not caring that

I lived in a rental property, not caring that someday, someone would see the madness I scribbled. I just got it out.

Before he left, we had fought. I had been watching television on the bed, a flannel shirt of his buttoned up to my throat. Spread across the bed, I was enjoying being alone when he walked in and over to me. I patted the bed and he sat down on it, joining me. It had been three months since we had sex and when he started to kiss me, I pressed my body against his. He took off his pants and began to wedge my legs apart, so I pushed him off, my arm struggling under his weight.

“What’s wrong with you?” I had asked. “Are you fourteen?”

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling in that exaggerated way he had. I stared at him, waiting for a response. My head swayed back and forth and I realized I was actually shaking my head at him I was so puzzled by his behavior.

He started to kiss me again and pushed me down onto the sheets that smelled of sweat and were decorated with grease stains. We wrestled, my dough like limbs white and fleshy pushed against his, fingers locked. Then I was down and a pillow was over my face and I couldn’t see anything as I felt him pressing it down. I tried to claw my way free of him. Nails pushed into human flesh create a gritty sort of tear, a noise that sounds like snow when it’s crunched down by a fat, wet boot. Sponge like the way it gives under the weight and absorbs. With no reason, he released and I could breathe; I drew a deep breath even though the whole event lasted less than twenty seconds. I pulled my arm back to slap him but he grabbed it, bore teeth, and bit. My reaction was



to yank away and I end up hurting myself worse, causing a tear as his teeth held on to me.

He kissed me and for the first time in months I didn't feel a wave of nausea or the urge to escape. Instead I felt the most basic response: the urge to kiss back. No longer repulsed by him like I had been, merely at myself. In the back of my head a voice told me that I was a cliché, something far worse than a statistic because violence isn't romantic, and letting him breathe heavy against my flesh and grope at me, letting him consume me the way he was somehow romanticized violence. And that same little voice told me that no one would understand.

After, he got dressed and I watched him, his chestnut hair sticking out from his head like straws. Like a scarecrow. He pulled on his wrinkled khakis, the ones he would wear for too many days in a row before he washing them. I watch him as I lay sideways on the bed, my elbow pinning the pillow. My bed, the one with the bright red t-shirt sheets, felt so foreign to me. Matt looks at me one last time, his face blank and his thin eyebrows drawn down to the bridge of his nose and he walks out, through the living room, out of the house. As he pulls the door shut I wonder if he's still mad.

My bedroom walls were white but dingy, gray spots and stains running up the sides. At least I used a pen, I thought, smiling at my own humor. Tense and tight, my muscles made me feel propelled forward, but somehow I couldn't move- too tired. Instead, I buried my face in the pillow that smelled peppery like his cologne. Tucked away inside a cottage—a green shuttered, stone faced cottage—cuddled up to a little, mopish white dog that I take for walks and a small child with round cheeks and eyes the

size of fists. On the outside, my life was sweet. A happy ending. Inside my house, I was still the girl with the boyfriend that walks out thirty feet ahead of her because he claimed his legs are too long for him to slow down. The one who reached out for his hand only to find that his fingers are too broad to lace between hers.

So I sat, hands balled up in frustration staring at the mounds of dirty laundry I can never keep up with, the writing on the walls that someone would eventually see. I knew I should care, be embarrassed that I scribbled like a two year old, but I could barely bring myself to care what the day held, let alone months or years in the future.

Over the phone with my mom that night, I relayed the whole mess to her. My face was raw and I knew that the white skin around my freckles had turned red, the way it always did when I cried. Like bullseyes. She suggested that I should probably walk away, but I knew she didn't believe it because, at the end of the day, as long as I had someone, she thought I was doing just fine.

My mother, her forehead sopping with sweat and her puffy hands clenched together, kept telling me how thin I looked. Which simply wasn't true. Not thin, just not as fat as I used to be. My legs were slender, and my collarbone looked nice since it was actually visible. Either way she pointed out my change in physique at least ten times since I arrived at her house a mere half hour before. Not worry driving her, although she knows I've been having trouble eating lately, or even pride. She's driven by the fact that she has a selling point for me; there's a way to market my worth. As I sat on my grandma's brown tweed couch, Matt sat next to me. We had been divorced for four years. He

wanted to show me a scrapbook he'd put together, although the photos lacked organization and were jammed roughly into the album's pages. As I thumbed through the pages, I noticed that he has pictures of our wedding day, but none of me. It seemed strange, this absence. Like he somehow wanted to keep the day, just change the guest list of the event so that I was never there.

My mother leaned down so that her elbows pressed into her knees and smiled too wide. Her smile resembled a box. Her eyes darted back and forth between us, seeing something she wanted to believe existed. She didn't care that I've remarried, or that he chose to memorialize the day of our union without me in attendance. She got up and came to join us, but I stood up and intercepted. Holding onto the edge of her shirt, I led her into the kitchen. I reminded her that this man once held a pillow over my face so that I couldn't breathe.

"Do you remember, Mom?" I asked. "Do you remember when I would call you freaking out and crying because he'd hit me or cheated on me? Or because he locked me out of the house or took off for days at a time?" I wanted to shake her, but instead I just asked her, "Remember that time . . .".

Face still as concrete she stared right back at me, no problem holding my gaze, and said: "I really wish you would have told me that all this was going on. After you two split, it shocked me to hear about the way he treated you."

I walked out of the kitchen and almost tripped on the heel of my boot and she followed behind me. Arms crossed around my body, I lowered myself back down on the brown tweed couch and tried to watch whatever was on the flatscreen to tune them out.

My mom had shaken off the conversation we had just had and was looking brightly at Matt's equine face. As she leaned close to him, with a voice high and brimming with enthusiasm that reflected her majorette youth, she asked: "Matt, can you believe how thin Brittany has gotten?"

"Can you just shut the fuck up?" I responded, my voice equally full of saccharin sweetness. I felt the color leave my face and realized I was ashamed. At some point, I would have to assert myself and make it known that I don't want to be sold to this man. No matter how coy and cutesy my mother acts, I will not re-live my past with him. My mind egged me on, channeling my inner brat that wanted to tell her that she is picking at something that is mostly stitched up and that she has always spun things, taking things I've confided in her and either willfully denied I ever told her, or insisted I must be over-dramatizing them now.

My ex walked out of the room after I cursed at my mom. He was chuckling quietly to himself and muttered something about "letting us handle our disagreement privately."

I can see my mother the day she signed over custody of me to my grandparents. I remember it, even though I wasn't there. She told me about that afternoon so many times that it's like I'm watching it on a movie projector. She was seventeen, but in my film looks thirteen; her sandy blonde hair that falls in wisps to her shoulders covered by the starched, white cap of her majorette outfit. The sun is shining so bright that there's a white glare behind her and behind her is the gray saltbox that we didn't live in until I was five and she was twenty. She told me that the day she signed the papers it was hot, and

she was sweating from cartwheeling in the front yard. Her body is flat and rigid and her limbs don't move as she tumbles across the neon frosting green grass, her body a C shaped wheel. Occasionally when I play this scene, she is holding a Sparkler.

My grandparents came out with the papers and she signed them. They told her all the papers did was enable them to seek medical treatment for me, something that was necessary because toddlers can have accidents so fast. I want to ask her, didn't you read them? Didn't court papers have to be notarized? But she tells me about this day like she was tricked, like she didn't understand what custody was, the same way she swears she didn't know you could get pregnant the first time you have sex. The same way she erases all blame from anything she does. My mother taught me that you can re-write your own history.

Zoe didn't want to go to sleep and argued more than usual when I turned off the television that night. Her forehead, so baby white and smooth I could see the turquoise of her veins, was warm as I bent down to kiss her. Sometimes I would just stare at her, loving how our eyes are exactly the same color but just a different shape.

"I know it's confusing," I whispered, leaning back and laying my head close to hers on the pillow. "But you don't need to think about it. Your daddy is a good person and he cares about you, he just gets mad sometimes. Even Mommy gets mad sometimes, yeah?"

She nodded her head at me, but didn't answer. I was satisfied, knowing I had said just enough to silence her for a little while. Before I had children I never thought I

would lie to them about anything. I believed that it was healthy to be an open book. Next to my own child, so close to her that I could feel her breath hot and humid against my cheek, I knew that there were some things I would never tell her, no matter how deeply I wanted to. I would never say that her father, one way or another, had wanted me dead the day I flew out of the same van in which I used to do my motherly errands. I would never say that I believed if her father didn't still want to please his parents, we probably wouldn't see him anymore. Most of all, I'd never say that sometimes I hated how her eyes were the same color as mine, but shaped just like his and how, because of that, somehow, he and I would always be intertwined.

Some things, I realized as I shut my eyes and tried not to fall asleep in her bottom bunk, just have to be revised.

## How to Win at Couple's Therapy

We sat in the waiting room of our college counseling center. My eyes scanned the walls and posters that warned of the dangers of STDs made me glad to be a “non-traditional” student, though I’m not sure if the term refers to my status as a mom or is just calling me old. But I have learned to embrace it. You sat beside me in the gray wool coat my grandma bought you for our trip to the Greenbrier and I leaned my head against your shoulder for a minute before going back to my book: John Gottman’s *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. I skimmed through the first chapter as I waited to be called back by the therapist.

That morning, when we got up and began to get ready to meet with the therapist, I joked as I stuffed the dog-eared book (that I had bought with husband number one) into my backpack. “She’s going to see me come to marriage counseling with a marital self-help book and I’m going to be the favorite.”

You smiled at me then. But as I waited in the lobby, barely scanning the pages, I wondered how much of my joke had actually been in jest. There was a bit of truth in it, but I shrugged off the shame it brought me. *It’s natural to want someone to be on your side*, I told myself. *Especially when you’re pouring out your little secrets.*

In the parking lot of Kroger, we had recently had an argument. Our PT Cruiser had slipped out of gear and turned off, which made me tense because I didn't understand the mechanics of cars.

"Do the brakes still work when the engine turns off?" I asked.

"Of course," you said.

"But how do you know the mechanic fixed them right?" I asked.

"Because they didn't work on the brakes," you said. "The timing belt is nowhere near the brakes."

I wasn't sure that they could be trusted. "They busted that water hose or whatever. They made mistakes."

"They didn't make any mistakes," you said, your hand at ten and two and your knuckles turning white. "It's just something that happened."

When it happened, you had been furious with the dealership. You fumed that the car would sit on the lot an extra day, talked about their inability to complete a simple task, ranted about the money we were spending on a rental. Here, back in our PT Cruiser, though, you were no longer mad at them. Your eyes were squinted olive, your teeth set. I had wondered then, too, when you stopped being on my side.

The therapist finally came into the room: a tall, with short, blondish hair and brown eyes that squinted as if she were looking directly into sunlight. Her name was



Kim. It was funny: a Kim had contributed heavily to our participation in therapy. She beckoned us back to her office and we followed. As I put my book away, I made eye contact to see if she was paying attention. I sighed to myself as I realized she wasn't. She looked at her watch instead. I looked into the open doors and people met my eyes as they looked up from their work. *My shoes must be loud*, I thought, trying to clompy less.

The chairs faced Kim's desk. She had pictures of her little boys, two blonde stair steps. I shifted in my seat as I waited for her to speak. You sat next to me, but I didn't look at you and, even though I knew I had no reason to be mad. I shifted again, inching as far away as I could. I wondered if my body language made me look like a bitch.

Rubbing her long fingered hands together, Kim asked, "Why don't you tell me a little about the two of you and what you think your biggest problems are?"

We looked at each other. I watched you rub your scraggly goatee. I hated your goatee. So long that it could almost be braided, it made me bristle. The hairs were like pubes sprouting from your face.

"Why don't you ask her?" you responded, gesturing towards me with your skull. "She brought a list and everything."

Kim again squinted her eyes. "You brought a list?"

I smiled as widely as I could, trying to show teeth. I felt put on the spot, like my list was private. Nonetheless I bent over and reached back into my pink bag. Hot pink and orange flowers print adorned my notebook, a Christmas gift from you. My blue

eyes, the ones you once told me were the color of denim, read over the list I had made the night before in hot pink ink, careful to choose my words. Kim looked at me silently as I sat with my notebook open, as though we were playing chicken. She wasn't showing signs that she would swerve, so I accepted my fate and, after I cleared my throat, talked first.

"It's really pretty basic stuff. . ." I focused on the desk, a burning spreading across my cheeks. "I judge him a lot. That's my biggest flaw. At the same time, I feel as though I'm spoken to very condescendingly at times and I don't know why. It's frustrating."

I had paraphrased. A lot. The actual list:

- 1) I feel as though I'm far down on the list of priorities after (esp.) video gaming.
- 2) I feel judgmental towards him. (Background, values, parenting style)
- 3) I feel like I'm spoken to condescendingly, corrected, and almost trained
- 4) Sometimes it seems like whatever I'm trying to be positive about is put down. As if my enjoyment of said thing is damning.
- 5) Different communication techniques. He's a yeller which really heightens my anxiety. The more stress in our marriage, the more anxious I become which, in turn, creates more stress on my marriage.

The biggest issues had been left off because I had no desire to answer the questions they would create, or the battle that would follow. My eyes didn't leave the list as I thought about all the real problems: the way I had felt when I found the picture you took of the girl outside one of your classes, the stranger you had never met. I was so jealous of her with her waist length copper hair that burned like fire as the sun hit it, but even more like fire when I filled with rage afterwards. Her white t-shirt was rolled up to reveal a firm abdomen and the v at the top showed her cleavage. Or how it had felt when I found the picture of your ex-girlfriend—the one also named Kim—in your e-mail and realized that, not only had she sent you pictures of herself, you had saved them by sending them to your own e-mail.

“What do you mean, exactly, that you judge him?” she asked, interrupting my thought process as her heel dangled a bit from her foot.

I looked over at you, and the way you sat with your elbows on your knees, hunched down and sleepy. You always managed to look high, even when I knew you weren't. Baggy jeans with the words “Phat Farm” scrawled down the sides in cursive and a white hoodie with ink stains on both the breast and one cuff. I had picked my clothes carefully that morning, choosing a black ruffled skirt and a silver-sequined sweater. I wanted to appear professional, yet fun. To make an impression. A bit kinky, perhaps, with the sequins. My family believed that a person should always look nice when they went to any sort of doctor. You and your family didn't seem to care about impressions at all. I focused on the orange wood of her door.

“His family of origin, mostly, or FOO as Miah and I call them,” I said. I had stolen the acronym from a parenting message board I frequented. There was always something to say about the biological family of the other. I sighed as I thought of my own family, poised in public but trashy behind the scenes.

When we had first started seeing each other, I was separated from my first husband, but our divorce wasn't finalized. I had no plans to settle down, just wanted to have a little fun to get my trainwreck marriage off my mind. One morning after you had spent the night, there was a knock on the door. I got up to answer it, scuffling around the apartment to find a pair of pants. I walked through my shoebox apartment, my feet cold from the draft along the wood even though it was summer. When I opened the door, a man with a thick mustache was standing there, his body slumped up against the dingy hallway wall. He looked like a cowboy from a bad Western.

“Yes?” I said, as I took a step back.

“Yeah, I'm a detective here in town,” he said, and flashed open a badge of some sort- not a police badge- before continuing. “I wanted to ask you some questions about a girl that lived here before you. Her name was Amanda.”

I must've raised my eyebrows at him and scoffed. “How would I know anything about the girl who lived here before me? I didn't live here.”

He leaned forward at my smartass comment and stuck his index finger out.

“Well, she's missing,” he said.

About that time you walked up, your dreadlocks swaying without your shirt on, a silver hoop through your right nipple. The detective's eyes focused on the nipple. I gave you a little elbow to your side, silently chastising you for coming to my open door topless. Arm snaked around my waist, you rested your head on my shoulder as you stood behind me. For a moment, no one spoke.

"Amanda?" I asked him, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. I didn't know the man at my door, I didn't know Amanda, and you smelled like pepper and whiskey, and I wanted to go back to bed.

I later found out there was no Amanda and the man that had interrupted my lazy summer morning was a private eye that my grandmother had hired to check up on you. Mad that I wouldn't tell her your last name (because at the time I kept forgetting it and was too embarrassed to say so), she had decided to pry. With my hands shaking, I confronted her about the total invasion of my privacy only to be met with a list of your criminal record (a handful of marijuana misdemeanors from fifteen years prior) and the assertion that there was no reason you would be interested in me unless you wanted my money (I had none) or were a child predator who was after my daughter (whom you had never met). I realized even as I sat in the therapist's office judging your mom for her maroon, electrocuted hair, I had no room to judge anyone's family.

"What about his family do you judge?" she asked.

I picked up my drink that had been sitting on her table for the majority of the session, blew into it for a moment knowing it was probably cold, and took a drink. She didn't like

me, I could tell. Her voice was harsh on the word “judge,” and I wanted to get up and leave, even though the whole idea of counseling had been my idea.

“Ooookay,” she said. She turned her gaze to you and asked, “Do you feel like she judges you?”

Your eyes rolled and you smirked. “It doesn’t really bother me that she judges my family. I judge them, too. Moved from North Carolina to get away from them,” you said, tugging the rim of your hat. You pulled the rim into your face. I felt gratitude because I knew there were so many ways you could have thrown me under the bus.

She pressed your answer, asking what else made you feel judged by me and you finally replied that you didn’t like how analytical I was about everything. You told her that I approached everything like a lawyer. I wondered what you meant. She, too, seemed confused and asked that you elaborate. I listened as you called me cold and described the way, when we were fighting, I would attack you with lists and examples of the behaviors I didn’t like. Rehearsed, you called it, acting like thinking things through somehow made them less genuine.

Interrupting what I had come to see as your session, I said, “I only do that because you used to always hate the way I would come at you already so mad. I taught myself how to calm down.”

Kim nodded at me, her eyes wider. I didn’t know what I had said that had managed to be shocking, but I knew that look: it was the same one I gave my in laws when their backs were turned. The “oh my God, no she’s not asking where the closest liquor store is” look. All the while she looked at me like that, and I wondered what it meant when she

wasn't glaring. My ponytail felt loose on my head. I took it down then put it back up, smoothing the slick hair with my hand. I stretched the hair back so tight that it felt like I had given myself a facelift. I twisted the hair tie as many times as I could without snapping the elastic. I always do this when I'm nervous. The silence was sucking the air from the room.

I was losing. She was sympathetic to you and, though I had planned everything out, my failure wasn't surprising. I could feel my personality shifting from anger to detachment, and neither make people take your side. I wanted to tell her about all the things that had been left off my list, all the things pissed me off so that I had to be sitting in her tiny office in a hard chair. I looked at the books she had on her shelf. The receptionist had said she specialized in marriage counseling, but most of the books in her office were about sex. I thought about asking to borrow some, but I didn't know if that would be appropriate.

Kim wrapped the session up by scheduling us for the next week. In unison, we stood up, but once we reached the hallway we started to walk in opposite directions. After bickering about the fastest course out, I followed you. As usual. As we left the office, the sun shone in such a glow that we both squinted at the light. It was like exiting a movie. You reached out for my hand as we started to leave campus. We were both quiet. I wondered if you were mad about something I had said. My feet moved in small, quick steps as I tried to keep up with you, my boots knocking against the pavement. Cold wind rushed against my face so I tightened my coat across my chest, hugging myself.

You stopped and you said, "I think we should agree to try to leave what we say back there in that room."

My head nodded as if separate from me. I swallowed the urge to argue, to ask if that was possible. Can you really sit in a room with someone for an hour dissecting the things that make it hard for you to be with that person then walk away from it like nothing had been said? Can you really just shrug off a memory of the person that you should be closest to cataloguing your flaws as if they were ingredients on a cereal box?

I read once that marriage counseling has a very low success rate. Most couples who sign up to put their marriage under that microscope end up getting divorced anyway. In my first marriage I had tried it twice, with two separate therapists. We were extremely happily divorced. Maybe the rate of divorce is so high after counseling because the couples were already unhappy and, therefore, already likely on that path. I wasn't convinced that the therapy didn't make things worse: maybe it's all the talking that finally kills the thing. You can only forget so much after all.

"Absolutely," I told you, thinking I could believe it if I tried. "We will leave it all back there."

wanted to let it all go. I wanted to be happy with the guy who wooed me by telling me gross jokes as we sat side by side at a telemarketing company. So I smiled as I looked up at you, my head still bobbing up and down. I look back at this moment and think of the lies we tell ourselves to try to stay in love, even when we know it's a lie.



## Tradition

### Something Old

My string of professor crushes started when I was a Freshman. I went to Calamity Café with one after class, looking at him with wide blue eyes as I sipped Dr. Pepper. He ordered a whiskey, drinking it with thick bangs falling into his eyes, talking to me in that gravelly cowboy voice of his. Vic was his name. He looked like a Vic. In a restaurant that sold Southwestern food and had cactus art, he was practically camouflaged in a denim button up shirt.

I tried to be charming, tried to think like a charming girl. But instead a stream of intimate details flew out of my mouth, details that he listened to, eyes fixed on my mouth.

“I think my grandma tried to suffocate me once,” I told him.

“Really?” he asked. “Why?”

“I woke up in the middle of the night and she was holding a pillow over my head. I asked what she was doing and she said that she was fluffing my pillow.” This was a true story. It had happened only a week or two before I sat with him in the cafe, but I knew I was coming off dramatic.

He cleared his throat. “And you don’t think she was?”

“Why would she be?” I asked in my “duh” voice. As if it were the most obvious thing in the world that if your grandma is standing in your room at two am, she is trying to kill you. He smiled at me, his teeth yellowed and sharp. He looked British, but knew he wasn’t.

“I think the elderly are very interesting and would like to write a book about the experiences people have with them. Collect various anecdotes and anthologize them,” he said.

I aimed to be the authority. “Boy, I could tell you some stories. My grandma, though, she’s not elderly. She’s not quite fifty,” I responded, stirring my soda with its straw.

The bill came, one check, and I asked him how much my portion was. He told me it was his treat. I thanked him, but he brushed it off, motioning with disdain to my drink, saying that he could afford to pay for a Coke. I started to correct him, to point out that it was Dr. Pepper, but the price was the same and sometimes I needed to learn to be silent. We rose from the table and parted. As I walked back to campus, I wondered why I had told him about my grandmother.

### **Something New**

“When I see those kinds of cars, they always make me think of toy trucks,” he said, looking at the neon box in the Target parking lot. Through the glass of our car’s window, there was a glare, and I squinted to see the Hummer. I could picture what he

meant because the neighbor boys had toy trucks like that and he was right; they were always neon colored and not particularly car-shaped (I had a Barbie car, which wasn't car colored but hot pink, but at least the hood sloped downwards in a curvy, appealing manner instead of all those boxy lines and straight angles).

"Yeah, like one of those Honka trucks. Honka? No, wait that's not it . . ." I trailed off, trying to puzzle out what I meant.

"I think you mean Tonka," he said, the corners of his mouth fighting the rest of his face, trying not to betray the fact that he was laughing at me.

"Yeah, Tonka." I paused. "Tonka," I continued, "So what the Hell was I thinking about then?" Honka. That sounded like something. Honda? Was it Honda? "Honda," I said. "I was thinking of Honda. Wait—is Honda a real thing?"

He was full on laughing now, deep and throaty, and not even trying to hide it. Heat spread across my face. I'd said something stupid, as usual. I am bookish, but do not have much of a clue about anything else, even common knowledge that people take for granted. I never pay attention; as a writer this creates challenges for me. But I hate being teased. There is nothing in me that likes it or finds it playful. I get defensive and embarrassed, as my husband of three years should have known.

"Oh, yeah? If you're so smart, who wrote *Moby Dick*?" It was an easy one, a question any of my friends or professors would know the answer to. Even my grandma. He wouldn't, though. To me, *that* was something to be embarrassed about.

“I don’t know, but I do know this: what would happen if Anita Baker married Moby Dick and took his last name?”

I rested my forehead across the glass, warm from the early March sun. Anita Dick, c’mon. I steadied my voice and answered, “I really don’t care to speculate.”

### **Something Borrowed**

Her shoulder straps had slipped all the way down her thin arms, until they were simply laying there, not holding anything up. My first thought was that she looked sloppy, probably drunk. She leaned back against my step-father’s chest even as she gazed up at him. Her eyes were full of adoration. They were obviously on a date, glowing from the heat of the candlelight, white linen tablecloth brushing against their laps.

My step-father had uploaded this photo to his Facebook account. The girl’s hair matched her eyes, and it fell, clump-like and coiled, parallel to her slippery straps. There was a tale being woven here, something full of scandal that I shouldn’t be privy to. It was not my story to hear. I felt that I was eavesdropping somehow, looking at the very public photograph, the one that announced to the world that Elie would not be coming back. He had not divorced my mother, and his trip to Lebanon was supposed to be temporary. But his parents owned an aluminum plant and they owned villas. He could work, save up money, rebuild his life. After 9/11, West Virginia had slammed its door in his face, an invisible sign reading “no Arabs” swinging from the force.

On the morning I saw the evidence in my newsfeed, my mother had been rushed to the emergency room. She had woken up to a sopping brow and a belly swollen as though she were with child. At the hospital, they told her it was appendicitis. They could perform the procedure in their sleep it was so common. Hours passed after the surgery but she didn't wake up. I spent them growing nervous, biting down to the nub of my fingernails, watching the red of blood bloom. How was I going to tell my mother that her marriage was over? All I could think of was her, here in America, flayed as a piece of her body was cut out of her.

### **Something Blue**

Looking down at my feet, I wiggled my toenails, I stood behind the old wooden gate that surrounded my grandma's backyard, against all the undesirable things that could get in. My own mind was like the gate. I was blocking out all the things I refused to focus on. I would not, for instance, dwell on my horse faced, soon-to-be sister-in-law who scurried away from me every time I tried to talk to her while she carried trays set up for the reception after my wedding. I didn't think about the sound her matchstick legs made as they rubbed together, in her khaki Capri pants. My grandma's voice wasn't getting in, either. I didn't even remember how, every day since I had announced I was marrying Matt, she offered me five hundred dollars to call the whole thing off.

Instead, I forced in the pretty thoughts, sticking a gun into their backs and marching them into my mind. The deep plum and fuchsia of my wedding flowers, the band of them woven together around my veil. The way those same purples and pinks had

dripped from my bouquet, a cascade of lilies and roses. Tables lined the edge of my grandmother's porch, the same white wood as the gate, and I envisioned the eclectic mixture of food that was spread across it, handpicked by me. Grape leaves, cucumber sandwiches, baba ganoush, fruit.

The back gate creaked open as the wedding march began on my old cd player, the music (faded and crackling) sounding like it was coming from another yard. As I pushed through the gate, it tried to warn me back, groaning as I made my way down the aisle. I looked into the crowd, but I couldn't focus on anyone's face. It seemed like my walk was being fast forwarded. I looked up at the trees, at the gauzy pink fabric my grandmother and I had spread. I looked anywhere but ahead, under the trellis, at Matt.

Hands clasped we stood, facing each other, reciting the vows our pastor told us to recite. We had said we would write our own vows, but that hadn't happened.. There were tears in Matt's eyes and I wondered what in this moment was making him cry. I wanted to believe that it was love, or hope, or some other sentimental whisper. It was probably the thought that he was stuck with me, that I was it for him. I thought maybe I'd cry, too, but instead I forced back the choking laughter that was threatening to come out. I didn't know much about weddings, but I knew it was considered bad form to laugh at your groom's tears.

I wanted the wedding to be over, the long shapeless gown that made me look like a marshmallow stripped off. I wanted to stuff my mouth full of the lady-like tea sandwiches and grape leaves, my plate filled to the brim with anything to get the taste of my vows, my stiff, scratchy lace tasting vows, out of my mouth. Wiggling my toes again, I

thought about the dancing and the music. I couldn't wait to kick off my shoes, the new ones with the clear, rhinestone encrusted strap I had bought for twenty dollars, and show everyone that, during my first ever pedicure, I had decided to get my toenails painted teal as my something blue.

## Fueled

My grandmother has thin hands that wrap around the knife in a way that is intimate. She holds it while she peels the skin off a potato. She allows it to curl into ringlets, do acrobats mid-air, and then hover before the skin falls into the drain of her sink. "It's Mae," she tells me, referring to her knife. "I could never peel a potato without this knife."

Even though the winter is inwardly collapsing and the snow is whitening out the sky like a blemish it tries to forget, the heat in my nanny's home comes from the oven. She never turns her furnace on unless it's a necessity. "Have you been out today?" she asks us as she parts the sheer curtains that cover the window overlooking the brick alley.

"Well, yes," I reply. "We came here."

She tells me she has been wanting to get out, but that she doesn't want my grandmother or aunt to yell at her about her safety, so she is glad that we stopped in to make her less stir crazy. She asks if we have eaten and we tell her that we have, but still she makes toast and butter, fried eggs, and bacon as she starts the coffee.

"No perfumed coffee here," she says, like she always says, making a joke about the fact that my husband, Miah, and I like to try different flavored coffees. We sit on the yellow oak kitchen chairs and sip our coffee. Miah winds down the breakfast as if he hasn't already eaten and I smile from across the table.

Nanny's kitchen has provided a nexus for our family. The birthdays we celebrate together include a "stovetop buffet" that Nanny has spent hours preparing. Despite the



meat hot in a pan full of gravy, despite the stuffing, mashed potatoes, wilted lettuce and glazed carrots, despite the yeasty rolls that globe outward like a pregnant belly, there is still the need for more. Someone brings dessert. Someone brings a shrimp tray. Someone else brings the spinach dip in the rye bread bowl and a cheese ball. We eat like this on Thanksgiving, on Easter, on Christmas, on the fourth of July, on birthdays. We find reasons when there are none. We aren't a family unless there is a meal attached.

My youngest daughter doesn't eat the food. She won't eat mashed potatoes or meat. She will eat a roll with butter and some salad if there are tomatoes. She will not eat the cake or pie afterwards. She will not eat green beans or deviled eggs or shrimp. At home, we have learned what she will eat: she will eat a bologna sandwich. She will eat chicken nuggets. She will eat a fried egg—no toast. When she was two, we began keeping a list of foods that she would eat on a magnetic notepad that stuck onto the kitchen door.

In our family, no one has ever been a bad eater. She was fed biscuits and gravy in Nanny's kitchen when she was six months old and, though I mildly protested when my great-grandmother first raised the spoon to her open mouth, there was no stopping it. Better to let people in their eighties do pretty much whatever they want, short of killing someone. She was trained from her infancy to love the starchy warmth of bread and to top that bread with more flour and butter and grease. She was trained to eat like we all eat, but she resisted.

The dietician came to talk to us about our daughter. The pediatrician had recommended that she give us a little help, that my daughter have what she called "intervention." They told us tricks for putting on weight and told us foods that we could sneak into other foods. They gave us cardboard boxes full of milkshakes designed to bulk you up, but she wouldn't drink them. We tried sneaking them into hot chocolate, mixing them with syrups, camouflaging them with spoonfuls of regular milk, but nothing worked. She would not drink.

"Butter!" the dietician told us. "Pour melted butter on everything. Add whole cream to her food. Make it a game to see how many different ways you can add calories to what she eats."

My daughter would not grow the way other children grew. She would not expand or stretch, but stayed in the same size clothes. Still, I didn't want her to grow the way the dietician wanted her to grow. In West Virginia, I thought, there has to be a way to

make a child catch up to her peers without teaching her habits that are killing our families and have been for generations.

Nanny's father, they tell me, ate steak and eggs every morning of his life and drew his last breath in his nineties. He didn't survive on grease and starch, he thrived on it. He was skinny and tough and hard working until the day he died. But that's the difference. Nanny's father did field work, tended to animals, plowed land that would have stretched over our suburban sprawl. We feed our children the same diets and sit them in front of a computer where they pretend to garden.

My nanny plays the feed-the-baby game. When she gets a bite in her mouth, and that bite is chewed and swallowed, it's like she has scored a goal. It's a victory. My nanny has fed us all and, despite her skinny legs and frog belly, my littlest will be no different. When we go to dinner, my nanny feeds her every tomato from the salad bowl and she lets them soak in a puddle of ranch dressing. She puts butter and jelly on multiple rolls and she watches as she eats. Mouth in a tight lipped smile, she shakes her head at the tiny girl across from her. "She's the prettiest of all my grandbabies," she says. For a minute, I wonder if I should tell her she shouldn't say those things, but who am I to try to tell her what she should and shouldn't do? They are things she has always done.

The food my family eats is not healthy. No magazine peddles it as a way to trim down or tone anything. Appalachian food is known for comfort (for its efficiency as fuel). When West Virginia is in the media for our food, it's because Jamie Oliver has come to rescue us. He shows us how to eat, his advice unreasonable. When he visits the home

of an overweight woman whose son, a physician warns, is on the verge of diabetes, he pulls frozen pizzas out of her freezer. He tells her that, while he understands that pizza is tasty and can be tempting, the kind she bought *isn't even good pizza*. My heart hurt as he he said that.

I understand what Jamie Oliver was thinking as he told the woman her frozen cardboard pizza tasted like crap. He was thinking it was a laugh they could share together. What he didn't understand in that moment is that they don't share a culture. A good pizza would taste foreign to the woman he was talking to. If you put goat cheese and prosciutto in front of her, she wouldn't want it. To her, pizza has a meaning: pizza is a food that has cheese, grease, and salt. It is not the opportunity to put unpronounceable ingredients onto a gluten free square of dough.

More importantly, women who are raising families with multiple children in West Virginia who stock their freezers full of pizzas for other reasons: they have to be able to afford to feed their families. And not everyone—especially in one of the poorest regions in the nation—can afford organic, lean, farm-raised food.

Jamie Oliver's *Food Revolution*—a show I watched with a sort of hypnotic fascination— shows families with freezers stuffed full of Totino's Pizza Rolls, Hot Pockets, and Hungry Man dinners. But this is not how people I know eat. We are a people who hold knives with love. We watch the skin fall from our produce. We don't eat out of boxes, just like my daughter won't drink from one. Our meals are made at home from ingredients we have touched and squeezed and felt. Food that may expand our bodies, but that comes from our hearts.

## Why I Can't Get Over JonBenet

### I.

Her hair framed her face in a wave of perfect yellow spirals. Her skin was the color that I had heard about in fairy tales: ivory. She was my age, or close, and the first time I saw JonBenet Ramsey on the television screen, my only thought was how much I wanted to be her. Her mother let her wear lipstick; my grandmother told me lipstick made my mouth look like a possum's butt. She owned the stage in evening gowns and taffeta like an overgrown Barbie doll; I wore jeans almost every day. She was a princess with a crown that was bigger than her face. I was just a girl.

### II.

The year I turned five, I had a recurring dream that I was kidnapped. There was no evidence in my sleep that suggested I had been taken by force; it was something I knew without having to be told. In the back of a vintage station wagon, I sat with my back against the vehicle's hatch. From underneath an army blanket, I could see traffic, the parking lot where the Fourth of July carnival was held every year, and the car lot that was owned by my mother's ex-boyfriend. I had the sense that the blanket was itchy, even though I couldn't feel it.

We stopped at a light in front of the video store and I saw my family. My uncle held the door open for my mom and then tried to trip his younger brother. They were smiling and casual as they entered the store and I wondered what they would rent. When my grandfather entered the building, everything slowed down. As the door shut, I

realized that they didn't know I was gone. Or, worse, they did, but they were still going about their lives as if I hadn't ever existed. I thought about my mom, barely twenty at the time. Would she be home with her brothers getting movies if I disappeared? I didn't know but I remember that I had a sense of what I was in their lives: an interruption. Maybe if I would have been kidnapped, there would have been a way to unpause.

### III.

It was Aliayah's eyes that got to me: sad, like a cow's, sunk deep into her small face. A three year old girl had gone missing in rural West Virginia. I thought of my own two small girls. The differences, of course, were profound. Photo after photo was released of the toddler, and each time the child looked sadder, her eyes wider and more like a pot of melted chocolate. The only picture of her when she actually smiled was the one where she had two pigtails on either side of her head and her thin arm was submerged in a Doritos bag. I felt ashamed for judging the mother of a missing child, but I still couldn't help it. I asked myself: *Why are there no pictures of this little girl smiling?*

The national news was never interested in the story of a missing Appalachian toddler. Shortly after Aliayah's disappearance, her mother was arrested for selling her foodstamps. The FBI released a picture that caused me to stay up at nights thinking about a little girl that I had never met.

That same pouty lower lip, those same empty eyes. At three years old, the sparkle was already gone from the child. But it was the bruise that made me wonder. As a mother of two girls, I was familiar with the bruises children can get so easily, the bust-

ed lips that come from falling off a couch, or from standing in front of another child on the swing. There have been so many times I've giggled to my husband and said, *with all these scrapes and bruises, people are going to think I beat this child*. I think every mother has said it. Knowing that, I tried not to be too suspicious of Aliayah's mother, reminding myself that selling your food stamps isn't in the same league as murdering your daughter.

#### IV.

When I was twelve, I watched my half-sister sleep. I thought about how much I hated her and how we would never really be sisters. My grandparents were my guardians. Hers gave in when she cried. My parents both lived separate from me; hers were married and raising her. Our father went to watch her cheer (he was a family man who coached peewee wrestling). She was tiny, tan, and half my age, and she had the life I wanted. While I was heavy set, she was naturally petite. While I was awkward and had trouble making friends, she always said the right things, and had girls from the neighborhood over to jump on the trampoline all day.

Our dad was married to her mom and, even though as a truck driver he was away a lot, I knew that there would never be a period in her life when he didn't call her for nearly a year. She would never feel forgotten the way I did.

#### V.

Aliayah Lunsford disappeared and was forgotten. Maybe this is too simplistic. She is still wondered about by people in her community. She is still mourned by her family. But no national news looks back on the anniversary of her disappearance.

For JonBenet, there was no option to disappear into obscurity. Her story, the case of a little girl who was found dead in her own home, can't be released by the media even though her remains were found after only a day of looking. We only know the bare bones of the case, but somehow it's almost enough. Kidnapped, but only for a small time. Murdered. Returned to her own home, the site from which she was taken. Found. It's true that not knowing who the villain was that could end the life of the small child is hard, as a nation, to accept. Maybe impossible.

For JonBenet, the fairy tale was made just that much more uncanny by the fact that she was murdered on Christmas Day. Something about the body of a small child—a child we expect to spend the day playing with the stack of toys she unwrapped that morning—being rendered lifeless among a backdrop of tinsel and lights makes her that much more tragic. But then there's an awkward nagging, a thought I don't want to have, but can't shake. It's as though with JonBenet, the small girl whose short life was weighted down by the metal of a crown, she become an ornament, rather than a child.

**VI.**



I tell myself because I have children I get lost in the stories of those who vanish. That being a mother enables you to see your own children on the full, smooth-cheeked faces of those who disappear. I tell myself this because nothing else makes sense. But I don't hold their hands too tightly as we walk in crowded stores. When my older daughter first used a public bathroom alone, I let her go.

Maybe that's the root of why we judge in the face of tragedy: I believe my daughter is safe. I have not spent a lifetime transforming her into a trophy. I was not reckless with her like Aliayah's mother. I am a good mother.

But what would the world see if one of my children went missing? From the time she was big enough to eat solid foods, my younger daughter was also big enough to shun them. If, God forbid, something were to happen to her and I was forced to hand out pictures to journalists, what would the viewer see? They would see a four year old girl with skin so pale that her blue veins scribbled like marker across her forehead, so thin that her clothing hung like a toga over her skinny frame. There could be a million reasons to explain away her looks but they would do what we all do. They would watch their televisions and speculate about the little girl who was obviously under-nourished by horrible parents. They would think *I only pray that little girl is better off than she was in the home she left behind*. The way I did with Aliayah.

Time has passed, and Aliayah has stayed gone. There were no more updates, not even on the local stations. That fall when Aliayah went missing, it seemed marked as much by the disappearance of children as it was by the changing of the leaves. In Florida, a baby went missing for days and we all prayed, tweeted, and solicited good

thoughts until the baby was found dead in a parking garage. Murdered at the hands of his own father. And little Lisa Irwin, who went missing just over a week after Aliayah.

There was something about her mother, as well, that every news outlet noticed. Nancy Grace, with her sharp-edged twang and even sharper blonde bob, narrowed her eyes as she speculated about Deborah Bradley. Lying about being drunk at the time her daughter went missing, lying about what time she went to bed—everything about Bradley seemed to be some form of lie. With both little girls, I wanted to feel only sympathy for the families that had lost their children but watching their stories unfold, I couldn't shake off my judgment.

## VII.

Princesses, especially little blonde ones with crowns, are not supposed to be murdered. They are supposed to go missing sometimes, but they are always found—by a desperate king who misses his baby, by a prince who will slay any villain to save her, by a wizard who can magic her back to life.

JonBenet, I remind myself, was not a princess. She was a young girl, dressed in gowns that outweighed her, suffocated by the taffeta her mother placed on her back.. To the people around her, she was always more trophy than human.

VIII.

Shortly after I turned fifteen, I told my father that the back and forth had to stop. That he had missed my birthday—he hadn't called or sent a card—and that while I was glad he was visiting a few weeks later, I needed him to make a choice. That he either had to be in my life, or leave me alone.

"Who are you to give me an ultimatum?" he asked, his teeth gritted and eyes like slits. He clutched hard to the arm rail of the escalator and I knew I had to drop it.

What I wanted to say was that I was his daughter. I was the one person who should be in a position where he cared enough about my feelings to accept them. I let it go because I knew that my words were meaningless; if I pushed it, he would simply forget that I was there, and the calls, though they only came once or twice a year, would stop all together. It would be like he only had one daughter.

VIII.

She was found in a way that destroyed any hope of her safe return, JonBenet was the only one of the girls whose story was resolved. Lisa Irwin was never found. Neither was Aliayah. Even if the truth does come out, I'm not confident that I will ever hear about it. There is no more talk about the girls on the radio or the news; I imagine that if you drove to their neighborhoods, to the place where they rode their bikes and learned to crawl, people still remember them, but otherwise it's like they've been erased.

What makes some children worth revisiting, tracking, hunting down, while others fade away? "Worth" sounds callous to me, but I'm certain that there is some sort of cur-

rency that I don't understand. Jon Benet was murdered in 1996, years before Aliayah or Lisa were even dreamt of, yet she has never faded. There have been anniversary specials on the major news networks every few years. But for Lisa and Aliayah, nothing is revisited now. Their faces just stopped being played.

X.

Once, at the playground in my town, my attention was split between my two daughters just a second too long. I watched my younger daughter walk up the hill to the higher section of play structures and climb onto a hammock, then turned to my older daughter as she asked me a question about the sand. When I turned back, I couldn't see Bebe. A man I had been watching was also gone.

In those twenty seconds, the noise drained to a buzzing in my ears as I scanned the playground. All it took for her to appear was a shift in someone's body but, for those seconds, I was sure she was gone. And somehow, it was long enough for me to have the thought: *what if they never find her?*

I don't know who "they" were to me, other than the police. I don't know why my mind automatically jumped to a place without hope. I only know that subconsciously there must have been times over the years that I tallied up what my family's worth would be on the news: *Appalachian, poor, divorced and re-married mother*. We had a lot against us. Such fear that my daughters wouldn't be worth a JonBenet, that she would be banished to static with everyone else that eventually faded from memory.

Or maybe that's too cynical. Maybe my fear was just the normal type and, in those frantic seconds, I mourned the possibility of losing one of my children as deeply as I would have if she were really gone.

## Asylum

White as dust against the cement floor, her body remained. Although the torso seemed intact, the stain cut her arms off at the elbows as though they hadn't been there at all. Little, odd details stand out for a moment- the shortness of her torso, the narrowness of her waist- but then you remember that you are staring at the outline of a dead woman and it probably doesn't matter that she was obviously quite thin. All that matters is how she got there, what left the stain in the first place.

"Do you believe that you are suffering from a legitimate medical problem?" The young doctor asked me, and I thought of my uncle (who is more like my brother as I was raised by my grandparents, his parents) who is also a doctor. This boy had the same wide bridged nose, the same thick, chestnut hair. Daniel would never be enough of a jerk to look at a girl who had a resting pulse of 130- a girl who had told him she hadn't eaten in nearly a week because she was unable to swallow- and ask her if it was a legitimate medical problem. As I sat on the thin paper, hating the way it crunched every time I moved, I thought about what he was really asking. What he meant to say was, *are you sure you're not just crazy and this isn't a symptom of whatever anxiety problem you're suffering from?*

That was a question I couldn't answer for him. There *were* some things I could tell him: that I'd lost seven pounds in just under two weeks because everything solid seemed to get stuck behind my windpipe when I tried to swallow, that I had Obsessive

Compulsive Disorder mixed with hour long panic attacks, that sometimes I had no control over my own thoughts. Food had become terrifying to me even as my rational mind told me how silly I was being. When I tried to eat, even after it went down I could still feel it in my throat somehow as though there was debris that clung to the roof of my mouth. Rooms had to be perfectly still when I ate and if anyone spoke I would choke. Food had become an enemy being and the smoothies I mixed up, while nutritious, weren't filling. I felt myself starving and I was afraid all the time.

Everyone needs a place to feel safe. For some people, that's everywhere. They walk down the streets without a care in the world, enjoying the smiles of people they meet, the opportunity for spontaneity. For Charles, that ended when he was away from home at college. After an afternoon trip to the movies, Charles was walking around town doing some window shopping. As he gazed into the floor to ceiling windows of a downtown department store, he stopped, his feet like weights holding him still. Something had changed. Eyes, nose, ears, all were still there, still in the right place, but as he

stared harder into the window his body leaned so close that his hot breath steamed the already smudged glass, he realized something he had been unaware of: he was grotesque.

At that moment, two girls walked by with their heads together like conjoined twins, arms laced at the elbows. Beautiful girls with thin waists and straight backs. Charles turned to watch as they passed by and they began to whisper and then giggle. Arms detaching from each other, one raised a slender, long fingered hand to her mouth as if she meant to keep the laughter inside her body, swallow it down so no one else could hear. It was him they were laughing at, he was sure of that, but why? Was it the size of his nose, the way it poked out like an accusing finger? Or was it the beadiness of his eyes and the way they seemed even smaller behind his thick lenses and wide, black frames? Hands up, he turned back to the window where he stood for the next hour in quiet examination. When Charles finally walked away from the department store window, he left school and returned to his childhood walls. Once he found asylum with his mother, Charles didn't leave the safety of his home for over a decade.

In 2010, the swine flu had the nation concerned. Everyone was concerned, that is, except me. I was terrified. In my bed, draped in a comforter that I called green but my husband called gray, I sat with a thermometer popped out from between my lips like a sucker stick. Each beep made my heart beat faster as I knew that it would reveal a fever. Weak and chilled, I pulled the blanket tighter. In a succession of quick chirps, the thermometer announced my temperature had registered. I pulled it out and stared hard



as though I was sure there was some prophecy that would be written there for only me to know.

99.4 degrees. *Not a fever*, I thought. *No flu yet*.

During the swine flu outbreak, it was always *yet* for me. When someone sneezed, I could visualize their green, slime covered germs floating through the air and happily settling on my nostrils. The flu is airborne up to eight feet. Eight feet was a safe distance in the grocery store and in restaurants, except that I never knew how recently someone else had been standing in the same spot I was standing, no way to know if their germs had invaded my air. As I began to realize how much those thoughts would stay with me even after I returned home, I began to stop going out.

Margaret Schilling was lost. She was lost in an asylum for a total of forty three days from December 1, 1978 to January 12, 1979. They discovered her remains the day before my husband's first birthday, six years before I was even born. Because she died in a locked room in front of a window in the middle of winter, the combination of sunlight and cold (at least according to popular theory) caused her body to leave a perfect outline, its very own police sketch, of her body in its last sleep. Like graffiti the stain still exists, white against the cement floor of the Ridges in Athens, Ohio.

This has nothing to do with me, I realize, but I can't shake thoughts of it as I read about asylums and psychiatric hospitals. I wonder if this woman was like me, scared of the world, but terrified by the inability to escape, too. An easy enough situation to imagine, the overcrowded hospitals a breeding ground for sexual assaults and violence,

even as they were supposed to keep her safe. It doesn't help that every scrap of info available is in agreement that she was found naked, her clothes folded in a corner. The fact that the floor was being renovated at the time makes me wonder how she ended up locked away on a floor that was no longer in use in the first place. If the floor was being worked on, why weren't there people to find her sooner, people who were doing the renovations? Did she seek out the closed space away from all the other crazies in an effort to get some peace? Was she lost and just ended up there? And why couldn't she get herself out? Did she even want to? The biggest question- the one that keeps me haunted by Schilling- *is how do you lose a human being when your job is to keep them safe?*

Some websites have speculated that Margaret was mute (although I have found little credible evidence to support this claim) and unable to scream for help once she realized that she was locked in, but nothing I found seemed to provide any evidence to support that theory. Mostly it seems like a random guess. If I was going to make my own wild speculation, I'd guess that she wanted to be left alone, was seeking asylum from the world that surrounded her. Like Charles and I, she wanted to find a place that was sacred and safe, a place where she could be okay.

In 1994, I moved into the house on Cedar Crest Drive and my grandma told me that she had become close friends with the man she had bought the house from. He had needed some help to get out of the place. I looked at her and asked, "Help what? Help packing?"

“Not exactly,” she answered and told me about the man who lived in our house before us.

His name was Charles, she told me, and it had been more than a decade before he had left the house. After years of being a caretaker for his sick mother, she had finally passed away and he had moved into her room. My young mind bristled at the thought of sleeping so close to the place where someone had died.

“Some help packing, yeah,” she continued and her eyes became unfocused as they stared, unblinking at the cabinets that hanged from the ceiling in our kitchen. “He had sweet-n-low packets overflowing from the cabinets,” she said.

Sweet-n-low was the pink stuff and I hated the way it tasted, the sweetness was too sweet and there was a bitterness underneath. Why would someone collect those nasty things? *Maybe he’s a diabetic*, I reasoned with myself, knowing that Papaw had recently given up sweets because of his diabetes. I asked my grandma, but she just looked at me, a tight frown yanking down the corners of her thin, wide mouth.

I don’t remember meeting Charles, nor do I know specifically what mental illness he suffered from (although agoraphobia seems to be a given) and most of my memories about him are like snapshots. Snippets of anecdotes, really, that can be expanded upon by other people that were there. Charles hated loose teeth, for example. Unfortunately, Charles knew me when I was seven and eight years old, a time in life when my teeth were falling out as though I were a mountain dew swigging, methhead. Tall for my age (which is baffling to me now, since I ended up 5’4) and skinny as a rail, I would stalk up

to Charles and put my finger in my mouth as I gave him the eyeball. He would lean his body away from me like a tango was going on between us and I'd bare my fangs at him. Two steps closer, I'd begin to wiggle whichever tooth was loosest at the time. If I could, I would pull it all the way backwards so that you could see the narrow black hole between tooth and gum.

As he closed his eyes and shook his head at me, I'd scream in delight. I loved the way he reacted to my teeth. Looking back, it feels almost cruel to me now that I so loved to scare him. Realistically, though, I think I thought he was putting on an act. Like it was a game to him, the same way it was for me. I didn't have the experiences under my belt that I have now, I had no concept of irrational fears.

Like coins. Some nights when my husband and I are in bed together, I hear his change rattle around in his jeans, melodic clanking that sets me on edge.

"Don't you dare let that fall out of your pocket," I tell him.

He glares at me as he removes the handful of coins he always has stuffed into his jeans pocket. As he dumps the change into a jug on our floor to ceiling bookcase, I glare back. Sometimes I think he spills the coins on purpose, trying to get a rise out of me. He thinks my fear is ridiculous- and he's right, of course it is- but I don't like the fact that he is willing to cause me stress in order to try to prove his point.

After the Ridges closed down, rumors suggest that students began to break in as a rite of passage, a chance to do something dangerous, but not too dangerous. Like me, they are fascinated by the stain of her body-not exactly like me, as I'm more haunted, really- and they want to see the place where the woman lay dead for so long that her body couldn't be removed. There are stories on the internet that suggest her spirit stayed behind, too, and that the Ridges is plagued by ghosts. When I heard this, I was a little disgusted to think of someone touching that spot-not just because it's the residue of decay- but because it feels so invasive.

Over Spring Break, I attempted to make my own pilgrimage to the Ridges. I hopped in my car at 11:00 a.m. and drove for two hours, my husband in tow. When we pulled up, I scanned the row of buildings to try to determine which one was building 26. Which one housed the stain. I made my way into the main building which had become home to the Kennedy Museum of Art in Athens, Ohio. The building was tall and squat, built like my boxer who was all shoulders. Although the face of the art museum was well-preserved, there were places where the white wood of the window frames were grayed from age and the stone was blotted by black charcoal as if there had been fire. Still, the columns in the front and the high, arched evergreen roof took away any hint of history the place could have. In its place was a simply beautiful collegiate art museum.

I pushed through the double doors that led into the actual gallery, my body rigid and straight to force an entry. I paused a moment after I walked in to watch the doors shut. A petite blonde with a bob sat at a cheap desk, her eyes glued to a computer screen. I walked up and cleared my throat before asking her if she knew where I could

find the hiking trails that led to the Ridges cemetery and whether or not it was possible to get close to the outside of building 26.

She looked away from her screen, the bluntness of her hair causing it to swing as she focused. "Building 26? You mean the tuberculosis ward? I think they tore it down."

I think about the stain I might leave behind, mostly on my children. In one of my classes we had been reading Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish" (Ginsberg's poem to his mother, Naomi, who he gave permission to have lobotomized) and I had almost started crying in class asking myself *is it possible to be profoundly mentally ill and still be a good mother?* I like to tell myself that it's like with cancer or diabetes, that while a child will experience some bad memories due to having a sick parent, they will understand that those incidents are because of something that invaded their parent. Those incidents are not who their parent was.

I know that my hope is unrealistic. Mental illness isn't like diabetes or cancer; there is no x-ray that can catch anxiety, no blood test that monitors depression. At the height of an argument, his voice raw from anger my own husband once said to me, "I think you use your mental illness as a crutch. It's not like there is any way to prove you even have it." People can accept that sometimes a person with cancer will die even if they use chemotherapy, even if they do everything in their power to get better. When people hear of a person who can't control their mental illness, the assumption is that the person in question doesn't really want to be helped.

Mostly, people with physical symptoms are often seen as victims, while people with mental illness are blamed.

By the time I was ten or eleven, we no longer lived in Charles's house and had moved out of state. We visited Ripley some, though; mostly when we needed to see my Aunt at the furniture store she owned. I always brought a book because I knew the shop was boring and I hadn't kept in touch with any of my childhood friends. After about an hour of my grandmother and aunt locking themselves away, I suddenly remembered Charles and asked my grandma if we could stop in and see him. She told me that he had passed away the year before.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, my voice raising with blame.

She looked around the store to make sure no customers overheard and extended her hand, motioning for me to calm down by making her palm parallel to the ground. "I didn't really think you needed to know, you hadn't seen him since you were little," she responded.

In some ways, though, she had been right. Charles had occurred to me only as an afterthought, not as someone that I was excited to see. He had faded to the back of my memory, not even someone I really visited through reminiscing. I think there were other reasons she had been hesitant to tell me about Charles passing away. Even though I was only eleven, I had just begun to have panic attacks and I think she was worried that death would have been hard for me to think about. Already I had moments when I couldn't swallow my food because I was too stimulated by noise and speed. Already I had begun to need to be away from people. She had to make this link, I tell my

self now, although that might not have ever occurred to her. While it seems obvious now, she probably had trouble looking at me at eleven- my face still covered with patches of freckles, my hair still cascading down my back- and know how much like Charles I would end up being.

When I heard that building 26 had been torn down, I felt like an idiot, but also like I had been tricked. Over the course of three months I had googled the Ridges almost every night, how was it possible that I had never come across a single article about the destruction? As I walked through the all glass art museum, I looked through the clear walls and my eyes scanned the exhibition. On the drive up I had been excited for the pieces on display, a collection of comics through the years. Now I was simply pissed that they cared about the history behind some old cartoons, but not the last remains of a woman's life. If even her stain had finally been removed after all the attempts made to clean her away, I felt there was nothing left to remember.

"Your illness fascinates me," an old love interest once whispered to me, and there was something in that I couldn't help but be compelled by at the time. Still can't, honestly. . . on the one hand, I think it's childish to be so enraptured by the darkness that dwells within someone, that it's like a high school goth, consumed with the macabre. I was tempted- albeit very briefly- to throw him some Poe and tell him I don't exist to entertain him. On the other hand, for my whole life being mentally ill has been a weapon people use against me, a tool to prove whatever point they're trying to make. He was



the first person to act like there is some value in the part of my life that feels like my biggest identity politic. Like I don't need to be fixed. I loved the way that felt but it still raised a doubt in me. . . am I a gimmick? If he did love me, like he said, would he love me if I got better?

I can't deny, though, that Eddie understood something in me that I don't even get. He understood my compulsion to fixate on my past, understands why I have such trouble letting go. He is the only other person I know that realized that, no matter what good comes into our present life, it is the past that has formed us and to just release that past into the wild like it's not energy, like it could ever be vanquished, is to ignore the *why*. Maybe that's part of mental illness- a need to understand why things are the way they are, to analyze, to work through. To fixate, definitely. We see that, like the residue from Margaret Schilling's remains, the more you try to scrub away at the things that make you the person you are, the more prominent those things become. The past isn't something that can be wiped clean. The past should stain us.

In the cemetery where the patients were buried, there are no names on the tombstones and the rows are tucked so closely together that it is impossible to walk without stepping on the land above a body. Destruction provides a backdrop. Although Building 26 is completely gone, the bright orange tractors remain as a reminder that Margaret Schilling's story didn't stain anyone. It was all torn down, the mess hidden away behind an Ohio Bobcat green fence and- easy as that- no more dangerous destination to draw in those who want to remember. No more monument.

I worry that I am guilty of erasing Charles from my history in the same way that I worry that I will be erased. The same way Margaret was erased. I'm lucky because for me being mentally ill hasn't kept me alienated from others. After all, we don't all die alone in a small town with friends to forget us, or tucked into a corner in an insane asylum. Most of us have lives that seem normal enough until you really look closely. The truth is, though, that no one ever forgets that our illness can't be seen or tested and that any marking that sets us apart is invisible. I think that's true because that's necessary. There are no safe places for us to hide away, but there are also less places to put us in order to keep everyone else safe. It's easier to wipe away the ugliness if you don't have to look at it. Everyone needs a place to feel safe- sometimes that place is on the other side of a wall from something you no longer want to look at. From something that needs to be torn down and erased. From whatever stains you.

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Office of Research Integrity

March 27, 2014

Brittany Nicole Humming  
3 Parsons Street  
Huntington, WV 25705

Dear Ms. Humming:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract consisting of a series of creative non-fiction essays focusing on your role as a woman in a dysfunctional, Appalachian family and how this has shaped your identity. After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,



Bruce F. Day, PhD, CIP  
Director

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